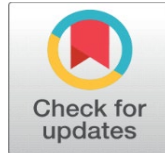
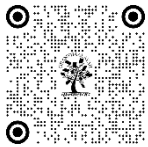


ACCULTURATION STRATEGIES IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S WHEREABOUTS

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DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.4797](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.4797)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Whereabouts* is a deeply introspective novel that explores themes of solitude, identity, and cultural adaptation. Unlike her previous works, which focus on the immigrant experience in America, *Whereabouts* is set in an unnamed Italian city and features a protagonist who experiences a complex relationship with her surroundings. This paper examines the protagonist's acculturation strategies using John Berry's acculturation model, which categorizes adaptation strategies as integration, assimilation, separation, or marginalization. By analyzing the protagonist's internal monologue and interactions, this study reveals how Lahiri presents acculturation as a psychological rather than merely a sociological process. The protagonist oscillates between marginalization and partial integration, unable to fully embrace or detach from her environment. Through her sparse prose, fragmented structure, and use of setting, Lahiri crafts a nuanced narrative that reflects the emotional toll of cultural ambiguity.

Keywords: Marginalization, Acculturation, Assimilation, Migration, Cultural Detachment

1. INTRODUCTION

Jhumpa Lahiri, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, is known for her exploration of identity, migration, and cultural displacement in works such as *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *The Namesake* (2003). In *Whereabouts* (2018), Lahiri departs from her previous focus on Indian-American experiences and instead presents a story of an unnamed female protagonist in an unnamed European city, largely considered to be Rome. Written originally in Italian and later translated by Lahiri herself, *Whereabouts* presents a protagonist caught between belonging and alienation.

Acculturation, a key concept in cultural psychology, refers to the process by which individuals adapt to a new culture. John Berry's acculturation model defines four primary strategies:

- **Integration:** Maintaining one's cultural identity while also engaging with the host culture.
- **Assimilation:** Abandoning one's original culture in favor of the host culture.
- **Separation:** Rejecting the host culture while maintaining one's original identity.
- **Marginalization:** Feeling disconnected from both the heritage and host cultures.

This paper applies Berry's model to analyze the protagonist's cultural adaptation strategies in *Whereabouts*, highlighting how Lahiri's protagonist struggles with identity and acculturation in a foreign land.

2. ACCULTURATION STRATEGIES IN *WHEREABOUTS*

1) Marginalization: A Life of Isolation

Throughout the novel, the protagonist exhibits characteristics of marginalization. She does not fully integrate into the local culture, nor does she appear to maintain strong ties to any specific heritage culture. She lives a solitary life, avoiding deep personal connections and frequently expressing a sense of detachment from her surroundings. In one passage, she describes her existence in the city: "I wander the streets, I observe, I listen. But I remain, as ever, apart." (*Whereabouts*, p. 45). Her words convey a sense of emotional distance. She is physically present but psychologically separate, mirroring Berry's concept of marginalization, where an individual feels excluded from both their original and host cultures.

2) Partial Integration: Attempts at Connection

Despite her tendency toward marginalization, the protagonist occasionally engages with her surroundings, suggesting moments of attempted integration. She frequents cafes, engages in small talk with acquaintances, and observes social rituals. However, these interactions lack depth, and she often retreats into solitude afterward. For example, when she meets a local acquaintance, she momentarily enjoys the interaction but soon reverts to introspection: "He smiles warmly and speaks with ease, and for a moment I feel I belong. But as I step away, the city folds itself back around me, as if I were never there." (*Whereabouts*, p. 92). This passage illustrates her fleeting moments of integration, which are quickly overshadowed by her ingrained sense of detachment. Unlike full integration, where an individual embraces both cultures, her experience remains tentative and transient.

3) Avoidance of Assimilation

The protagonist does not fully assimilate into the host culture. She does not form deep friendships or romantic relationships with locals, nor does she fully embrace the cultural norms around her. She acknowledges the vibrancy of the city but remains emotionally distant from it. In one instance, she reflects on the city's celebrations: "They dance, they sing, they embrace one another as the bells ring. And I watch from my window, as if behind glass" (*Whereabouts*, p. 130). This metaphor of watching "behind glass" symbolizes her resistance to complete assimilation. She is an observer rather than a participant in the cultural landscape around her.

4) Separation from Cultural Roots

While she does not assimilate into the host culture, neither does she actively maintain ties to her heritage culture, which remains undefined throughout the novel. Unlike Lahiri's previous protagonists, who grapple with their Indian identity, this character lacks a clearly defined cultural past. This makes her separation different from Berry's traditional definition, where separation implies strong ties to one's heritage. Instead, her detachment extends to all cultural identities, reinforcing her marginalization. At one point, she contemplates her past but finds no cultural anchor: "I recall my childhood home, but it feels like a place I dreamed of rather than lived in" (*Whereabouts*, p. 78). This sentiment suggests that she has no clear cultural identity to hold onto, leading to an undefined, fluid existence.

3. NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES AS REFLECTIONS OF ACCULTURATION IN *WHEREABOUTS*

Jhumpa Lahiri employs various narrative techniques in *Whereabouts* to reflect the protagonist's experience of cultural displacement and acculturation. These techniques—including first-person narration, fragmented structure, sparse prose, use of setting, and symbolism—effectively convey her shifting relationship with her environment. By analyzing these literary elements, we gain a deeper understanding of how Lahiri portrays acculturation as a psychological and emotional experience rather than a mere sociocultural process.

1) First-Person Narration and Psychological Introspection

The novel is written in the first person, offering readers direct access to the protagonist's inner thoughts. This narrative choice immerses the reader in her mind, emphasizing her introspection, solitude, and marginalization. Unlike traditional third-person narratives that provide an external perspective on a character's adaptation to a new culture, Lahiri's first-person approach forces readers to experience the protagonist's alienation firsthand. For example, the

protagonist often describes her thoughts in an interior monologue: *"I walk through the market, I see the same faces, hear the same sounds, but I am merely passing through. I belong nowhere, not here, not elsewhere"* (*Whereabouts*, p. 63). This internal dialogue reflects the psychological aspect of acculturation. Instead of focusing on external cultural markers such as food, language, or customs, Lahiri presents acculturation as an ongoing emotional process—one in which the protagonist is caught between belonging and isolation.

Furthermore, the protagonist rarely addresses others directly, reinforcing her detachment. Unlike traditional narratives that depict adaptation through interactions with local communities, *Whereabouts* keeps these interactions minimal, highlighting her marginalization rather than engagement with her surroundings.

2) Fragmented Structure: Acculturation as a Disjointed Experience

The novel's structure consists of short, episodic chapters, each capturing a moment in the protagonist's life rather than following a traditional, linear plot. This fragmentation mirrors her fractured sense of self and disconnection from both heritage and host cultures. Each chapter functions like a brief vignette, often focusing on a fleeting experience: a walk in the city, a visit to a shop, a conversation with a stranger. These isolated moments reflect her transient, liminal existence, where she neither fully integrates into the host culture nor firmly holds onto a heritage identity. For example, one chapter ends abruptly with the protagonist leaving a social gathering: *"I step outside. The night is alive with voices and laughter. But I turn the corner, and silence follows me home"* (*Whereabouts*, p. 97). The abruptness of this transition underscores her inability to form lasting connections. The fragmented structure reflects an individual who is emotionally adrift, mirroring the experience of acculturation as something nonlinear and unsettled.

3) Sparse Prose: Emphasizing Emotional and Cultural Detachment

Lahiri's writing style in *Whereabouts* is minimalist, with stripped-down descriptions and short, direct sentences. This sparse prose mirrors the protagonist's isolation and reluctance to immerse herself in her surroundings. Unlike Lahiri's previous novels, which feature rich, detailed descriptions of cultural elements (as seen in *The Namesake* or *Interpreter of Maladies*), *Whereabouts* avoids such embellishments. For instance, when describing a place she frequently visits, the protagonist provides only the bare essentials: *"At the cafe, the same barista nods at me. I sit at the window, sip my coffee. The city moves on"* (*Whereabouts*, p. 34). There is no warmth, no detailed engagement with her surroundings, only a sense of detachment. The minimalism of Lahiri's language reflects the protagonist's refusal to emotionally or culturally integrate into the city, reinforcing her marginalization.

4) Use of Setting as a Metaphor for Acculturation

The unnamed European city functions as both a physical and psychological landscape, shaping the protagonist's experience of acculturation. Unlike traditional immigrant narratives where cultural adaptation is explored through active participation in a new environment, *Whereabouts* presents the city as an impersonal space where the protagonist remains an outsider. Public places such as cafes, streets, and train stations symbolize opportunities for integration, but she never fully embraces them. Instead, these locations serve as backdrops for her continued isolation. For example, when she visits a bustling square, she describes it in a detached manner: *"The square is full of people, of life, of voices. I weave through them like a shadow"* (*Whereabouts*, p. 71). This imagery suggests that she is present but invisible, reinforcing her status as an outsider. Lahiri uses setting to reflect the protagonist's emotional distance, showing how acculturation is not just about geographical relocation but also about internal belonging.

Additionally, the contrast between private and public spaces in the novel further highlights her disconnection. While she observes public life from a distance, she often retreats to her apartment—a confined space that mirrors her self-imposed isolation. *"Inside, the world is mine. Outside, it belongs to others"* (*Whereabouts*, p. 56). This dichotomy between interior (safe, isolated) and exterior (vibrant, communal) spaces encapsulates her struggle with cultural adaptation.

5) Symbolism: Mirrors, Glass, and Reflection

Lahiri frequently employs imagery of glass, mirrors, and reflections to symbolize the protagonist's detachment from both her environment and herself. Mirrors and windows serve as barriers, preventing full participation in the world around her. In one passage, she describes looking at herself in a mirror: *"I catch my reflection in the glass. A stranger stares back"* (*Whereabouts*, p. 112). This moment illustrates her fractured identity—she does not recognize herself, suggesting that her cultural identity is ambiguous and unresolved. Similarly, windows often appear in her descriptions of the city, reinforcing her role as an observer rather than a participant. *"From my window, I watch the city wake up. I stay where I am"* (*Whereabouts*, p. 88). This recurring motif of observing from behind glass mirrors her inability to fully

integrate into the host culture. She remains physically close but psychologically distant, reflecting Lahiri's portrayal of acculturation as an incomplete and ongoing process.

Through first-person narration, fragmented structure, sparse prose, the use of setting, and symbolic imagery, Lahiri crafts a narrative that reflects the protagonist's struggle with acculturation. Unlike traditional stories of migration, which often focus on external markers of cultural adaptation (such as food, language, or customs), *Whereabouts* presents acculturation as an internal, psychological process. The protagonist oscillates between moments of marginalization and brief attempts at integration but never fully embraces either strategy. Lahiri's minimalist style and introspective narration emphasize her solitude, reinforcing the idea that cultural adaptation is not always a straightforward journey toward belonging but can also be an experience of perpetual dislocation.

By using literary techniques to reflect acculturation, Lahiri redefines what it means to be between cultures, offering a deeply personal and introspective take on cultural identity. *Whereabouts* ultimately suggests that acculturation is not just about adapting to a new culture—it is about negotiating one's place within it, a process that can be as fragmented and uncertain as the protagonist's own journey.

Whereabouts marks a shift in Lahiri's exploration of cultural identity. In *The Namesake*, Gogol struggles between Indian and American identities, ultimately seeking integration. In contrast, the protagonist of *Whereabouts* is neither fully integrated nor actively maintaining a heritage culture. This suggests Lahiri's broader commentary on the fluid and often ambiguous nature of acculturation, particularly for individuals without a clear cultural home. Lahiri's own experiences mirror this transition. Having moved from the U.S. to Italy, she has spoken about feeling like an outsider in both linguistic and cultural spheres. Her decision to write *Whereabouts* in Italian further reflects the theme of linguistic and cultural adaptation.

4. CONCLUSION

Through an analysis of acculturation strategies in *Whereabouts*, this paper reveals how Lahiri's protagonist navigates cultural identity in a deeply personal and introspective way. The protagonist primarily exhibits marginalization, with brief attempts at integration that never fully materialize. Her detachment from both host and heritage cultures highlights the psychological complexity of acculturation, emphasizing Lahiri's evolving narrative focus. Lahiri's sparse prose, fragmented structure, and ambiguous setting serve as literary devices that reinforce the protagonist's disjointed sense of self. Unlike traditional immigrant narratives, *Whereabouts* presents acculturation as a nuanced and fluid experience, raising important questions about belonging in a world where cultural identities are increasingly blurred.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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