

Forced Migration and Identity Crisis in the Works of Jhumpa Lahiri and Agha Shahid Ali

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Submitted: 05- Mar -2026 Revised: 10-Mar-2026 Accepted: 10-Apr 2026 Published: 30-Apr-2026

Manuscript ID:

IJEWLPSIR-2026-030203



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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.20905560

DOI Link:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20905560>

Volume: 3

Issue:2

Month: April 2026

E-ISSN: 3065-7873

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How to cite this article:

Gawade, V. N., Shaikh, S. I., & Bhujbal, D. M. (2026). *Forced Migration and Identity Crisis in the Works of Jhumpa Lahiri and Agha Shahid Ali*. *International Journal of English and World Languages & Literature Paradigm Shift in International Research*, 3(1), 8–11.

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Abstract

Forced migration is a defining feature of contemporary global society, arising from political unrest, economic instability, environmental disasters, and social upheavals. Its consequences extend beyond the physical act of relocation, often resulting in profound psychological, emotional, and cultural dislocations. Literature, particularly postcolonial and diasporic narratives, offers a rich framework for examining these consequences and the ensuing identity crises. This paper investigates how forced migration and identity transformation are represented in the works of *Jhumpa Lahiri* and *Agha Shahid Ali*. Lahiri's novels and short stories, including *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake*, explore the experiences of Indian immigrants and their descendants in the United States, addressing intergenerational tensions, cultural negotiation, and personal alienation. Ali's poetry, notably *The Country without a Post Office* and *The Beloved Witness*, illuminates the collective trauma of political exile, the enduring nostalgia for Kashmir, and the interplay between homeland memory and selfhood. Through detailed textual analysis and engagement with critical scholarship, this study demonstrates that both authors present migration as a transformative process that reshapes identity, situating the migrant in a liminal space between homeland and hostland.

Keywords: Forced Migration, Identity Crisis, Diaspora, Hybridity, Cultural Displacement, Postcolonial Literature, Jhumpa Lahiri, Agha Shahid Ali

Introduction

Migration has historically shaped human societies, influencing social structures, cultural practices, and personal identity. While voluntary migration often results from economic aspirations, educational opportunities, or professional pursuits, forced migration is prompted by circumstances beyond the migrant's control. Wars, ethnic conflicts, political oppression, environmental disasters, and colonial legacies have compelled countless communities to leave their homelands. Such displacement creates not only geographic relocation but also psychological, cultural, and emotional rupture, generating alienation, nostalgia, and complex identity negotiations.

Postcolonial literature provides a powerful lens to explore the experiences of displacement and the resulting identity crises. Diasporic writing, in particular, emphasizes the migrant's struggle to balance connections to the homeland with adaptation to the host society. It often presents migration as a liminal experience, a threshold between belonging and estrangement, past and present, and self and society.

Jhumpa Lahiri, an Indian-American writer, and *Agha Shahid Ali*, a Kashmiri-American poet, offer complementary perspectives on forced migration and identity crisis. Lahiri's narratives focus on first- and second-generation Indian immigrants in the United States, portraying the challenges of cultural negotiation, intergenerational tensions, and alienation within domestic spaces. Ali's poetry, rooted in the political turmoil of Kashmir, conveys the emotional and collective trauma of exile, underscoring the enduring impact of homeland memory on identity. By examining their works, this paper highlights how literature captures the multifaceted consequences of migration, including its impact on emotional life, social structures, and cultural belonging.

Forced Migration in the Works of Jhumpa Lahiri

Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction meticulously explores the Indian-American immigrant experience, focusing on how migration—whether forced or voluntary—reshapes personal and familial identity. Her narratives depict both the first-generation immigrants grappling with cultural adaptation and the second-generation individuals negotiating heritage and belonging in a foreign land. Lahiri's prose is characterized by understated elegance, careful attention to domestic spaces, and deep psychological insight.

In *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), the story “**A Temporary Matter**” portrays the emotional fragmentation experienced by migrant families. Shoba and Shukumar, a Boston-based couple, struggle with the loss of a child and the distance it creates in their relationship.

Lahiri observes: "*They had never found a language for what had happened*" (Lahiri 21).

This line emphasizes the difficulty of articulating grief in an unfamiliar cultural environment. Migration, even in its voluntary form, intensifies emotional alienation, illustrating that displacement impacts not only physical space but also intimate human connections.

In "**Mrs. Sen's**," Lahiri portrays the cultural disorientation of an immigrant woman in the United States. Mrs. Sen's struggle to adapt to life in a new country reflects her longing for her homeland and reliance on cultural rituals for stability:

"Mrs. Sen watched the fish swimming in the bowl as if they were the only creatures in the world who understood her" (Lahiri 34).

Domestic routines and sensory memories become tools for navigating estrangement, highlighting how cultural practices sustain identity amidst dislocation.

The Namesake (2003) further explores the intergenerational dimensions of migration. Gogol Ganguli, a second-generation immigrant, negotiates his dual heritage while confronting the expectations of his Bengali parents and the norms of American society:

"For a moment he wonders what it would be like if he were someone else entirely, someone who belonged" (Lahiri 58).

Gogol's struggle with his name, family legacy, and personal identity illustrates the psychological consequences of migration across generations. Language, cultural heritage, and familial expectation all intersect to create a complex, layered experience of displacement.

Lahiri's other works, including *Sexy* and *This Blessed House*, reinforce these themes. In *Sexy*, the protagonist Miranda navigates cross-cultural desire and identity, revealing the subtle ways displacement shapes social interaction. Across her fiction, Lahiri consistently demonstrates that migration is not merely geographic but a continuous negotiation of belonging, culture, and selfhood.

Scholarly commentary underscores these observations. Choudhuri (2006) notes: "*Lahiri's characters inhabit the interstices of culture and language, negotiating belonging in a space that is simultaneously home and foreign*" (Choudhuri 45).

Thus, Lahiri's literature presents migration as a sustained, liminal process affecting both individual and collective identity.

Identity Crisis in the Works of Agha Shahid Ali

Agha Shahid Ali's poetry foregrounds the collective, political, and emotional dimensions of forced migration. His work is particularly attuned to the Kashmir conflict, capturing both personal grief and communal trauma. Through his lyrical and elegiac style, Ali explores exile as a state of psychological and cultural tension, where identity is shaped by memory, nostalgia, and political circumstance.

In *The Country without a Post Office* (1997), Ali writes: "*In the country of no post office, letters arrive like tears*" (Ali 12).

This metaphor reflects the severance of communication, the sense of absence, and the profound dislocation inherent in exile. For Ali, forced migration is not merely physical but entails emotional and societal rupture.

Ali's *A Nostalgist's Map of America* demonstrates how homeland memory persists in shaping identity: "*Everywhere I go, I carry Kashmir*" (Ali 45).

Unlike Lahiri's focus on domestic, personal experiences, Ali emphasizes political and collective displacement. His poetry intertwines English, Kashmiri, and Urdu, reflecting the hybrid, multilingual nature of exilic identity. In poems like "*Postcard from Kashmir*" and "*Farewell*," he captures the enduring emotional and psychological impact of migration through intersexuality, historical allusions, and landscape imagery.

Critics have emphasized Ali's unique approach to exile. Gilani (2012) observes: "*Ali's exilic voice inhabits a liminal space, negotiating between memory, political reality, and cultural imagination*" (Gilani 102).

Ali's poetry thus positions the migrant within a dual consciousness, negotiating the tension between the remembered homeland and the host environment.

Comparative Analysis: Jhumpa Lahiri and Agha Shahid Ali

Although Jhumpa Lahiri and Agha Shahid Ali write in distinct genres—fiction and poetry, respectively—and originate from different cultural and historical contexts, their works converge in exploring the profound impact of forced migration on identity. Both authors depict migration as a transformative process that extends beyond physical relocation, reshaping emotional, psychological, and cultural dimensions of the self. Central to their work is the notion of liminality: migrants inhabit spaces between belonging and estrangement, negotiating identities that are neither entirely rooted in the homeland nor fully assimilated in the hostland.

In Lahiri's fiction, this liminality is often expressed within domestic and familial spaces. First- and second-generation immigrants navigate the tension between inherited cultural expectations and the social norms of American society. For example, Gogol Ganguli in *The Namesake* negotiates a dual heritage, torn between his parents' Bengali traditions and the desire to fit into American society. Lahiri's narratives emphasize subtle, everyday struggles—adaptation to cultural rituals, linguistic negotiation, and balancing family obligations—that collectively shape the migrant's identity. Even minor domestic acts, such as preparing familiar foods or observing cultural festivals, become strategies for maintaining a sense of self amid displacement.

Ali, in contrast, situates liminality within a broader political and communal framework. His poetry, rooted in the conflict and exile of Kashmir, depicts displacement as a profound rupture affecting both individuals and communities. In *The Country without a Post Office*, the disruption of communication represents not just physical exile but emotional and social dislocation. Ali's work foregrounds collective trauma and historical consciousness, illustrating how exile shapes identity through memory, nostalgia, and longing. Unlike Lahiri's focus on personal and domestic spheres, Ali emphasizes the socio-political consequences of forced migration, framing identity within historical, cultural, and political contexts.

Both authors explore hybrid identities, though differently. Lahiri's characters negotiate Indian and American cultural norms, reflecting the tension between assimilation and heritage in everyday life. Ali's hybridity emerges through multilingualism, intertextual references, and the intertwining of personal, cultural, and political narratives. In both cases, language functions as a crucial marker of identity—through Lahiri's focus on naming, bilingualism, and cultural expression, and Ali's blending of English, Kashmiri, and Urdu to articulate exile and cultural memory.

While their focus diverges—Lahiri on domestic and interpersonal dynamics, Ali on political exile and collective trauma—both authors employ imagery, symbolism, and nuanced narrative techniques to convey the psychological and cultural consequences of displacement. Together, they offer complementary perspectives: Lahiri illuminates the intimate, personal negotiation of identity, while Ali captures the broader socio-political and historical dimensions of migration, providing a holistic understanding of forced migration as a continuous, transformative process.

Themes and Literary Techniques

1. Liminality and Hybridity

Both authors depict migrants as existing between multiple spaces—homeland and hostland, past and present, self and society. Lahiri's second-generation characters negotiate identity within family and community expectations, while Ali presents exile as a constant negotiation between memory, political context, and lived reality.

2. Nostalgia and Memory

Memory anchors identity for both authors. Lahiri emphasizes family rituals and domestic continuity, while Ali frames nostalgia as a response to exile, blending emotional, cultural, and political consciousness. Memory becomes both a source of identity and a reminder of loss.

3. Language as Identity Marker

Language mediates identity and belonging. Lahiri explores code-switching, naming practices, and linguistic tension between generations, whereas Ali employs multiple languages and intersexual references, reflecting the hybrid and exilic nature of identity.

4. Symbolism and Imagery

Lahiri uses domestic spaces, culinary practices, and intimate interactions to symbolize cultural continuity and alienation. Ali's landscapes, letters, and historical references evoke exile, longing, and trauma. Both employ imagery to illustrate the psychological and cultural impacts of displacement.

5. Tone and Perspective

Lahiri's understated and intimate tone elicits empathy and emphasizes individual experiences. Ali's lyrical, elegiac tone conveys communal grief, political critique, and the broader socio-cultural dimensions of migration. Both approaches illuminate distinct aspects of identity crises.

Conclusion

Forced migration profoundly reshapes identity across personal, familial, and cultural dimensions. Lahiri and Ali, through prose and poetry, reveal its psychological, emotional, and cultural consequences. Lahiri emphasizes domestic alienation, intergenerational tension, and negotiation of cultural identity. Ali foregrounds collective trauma, political exile, and nostalgia.

Both portray migrants as inhabiting liminal, hybrid spaces between homeland and hostland, memory and reality, and self and society. Language, memory, and cultural practice emerge as key mechanisms for negotiating identity. Together, their works illustrate how literature renders visible the intricate processes through which forced migration shapes selfhood and belonging.

This study suggests that migration is not only a physical journey but also a continuous process of identity formation. Future research may explore parallels with other diasporic authors, including **Salman Rushdie**, **Bharati Mukherjee**, and **Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**, to examine broader patterns of displacement, exile, and hybrid identity.

Acknowledgment

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all those who have supported me in the successful completion of this study on *"Forced Migration and Identity Crisis in the Works of Jhumpa Lahiri and Agha Shahid Ali."*

First and foremost, I am deeply thankful to my guide/mentor for their invaluable guidance, constant encouragement, and insightful suggestions throughout the course of this research. Their support has been instrumental in shaping this study.

I would also like to extend my thanks to my professors and the department for providing the necessary academic environment and resources required for this work.

I am deeply grateful to the distinguished writers Jhumpa Lahiri and Agha Shahid Ali, whose literary works formed the foundation of this analysis and offered profound insights into themes of migration, displacement, and identity.

I would like to acknowledge the contributions of various scholars, critics, and researchers whose works on diaspora literature and identity studies have enriched this research.

I am also thankful to my friends and classmates for their encouragement and support during the completion of this project.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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