

## The Hyphenated Self: Immigrant Identity in Contemporary American Fiction

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**Abstract:** Contemporary American fiction has increasingly focused on the experiences of immigrants negotiating identity in multicultural societies. The notion of the “hyphenated self” encapsulates the dual or multiple identities experienced by immigrants who simultaneously belong to two or more cultures. This paper examines how contemporary American novelists represent immigrant identity through themes of displacement, cultural hybridity, memory, language, assimilation, and belonging. Drawing upon postcolonial theories of identity, diaspora studies, and cultural criticism, the study analyses selected works by Jhumpa Lahiri, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Viet Thanh Nguyen, and Mohsin Hamid. These writers portray immigrant identity as fluid rather than fixed, revealing the complexities of negotiating cultural inheritance while adapting to new social realities. The paper argues that contemporary American fiction challenges essentialist notions of national identity and instead celebrates hybridity as a defining feature of modern multicultural America.

**Keywords:** Immigration, Hyphenated Identity, Diaspora, Cultural Hybridity, American Fiction, Multiculturalism.

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## Introduction

Immigration has profoundly shaped the cultural, political, and literary landscape of the United States. America has long been described as a nation of immigrants, where successive waves of migration have transformed the nation’s demographic and cultural composition. Consequently, contemporary American literature increasingly reflects the experiences of immigrants who negotiate multiple identities within transnational spaces.

The concept of the “hyphenated self” symbolizes identities such as Indian-American, Nigerian-American, Vietnamese-American, Pakistani-American, and many others. Rather than indicating divided loyalties, the hyphen reflects a dynamic space where cultures intersect, overlap, and constantly reshape one another. The immigrant is neither entirely rooted in the homeland nor fully assimilated into the host nation. Instead, identity becomes an ongoing process of negotiation.

Contemporary American fiction moves beyond simplistic narratives of assimilation and instead presents immigrant identity as fragmented, pluralistic, and continuously evolving. Writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Viet Thanh Nguyen, and Mohsin Hamid explore the emotional complexities of migration, including nostalgia, alienation, racism, cultural adaptation, linguistic negotiation, and intergenerational conflict. This paper investigates how these writers construct the “hyphenated self” through literary representation. It argues that immigrant identity in contemporary American fiction embodies cultural hybridity rather than cultural loss.

## Theoretical Framework

The study draws upon postcolonial and diaspora theories that challenge fixed notions of identity.

Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of **hybridity** argues that cultural identity emerges within “Third Space,” where cultures interact and create new meanings. Immigrants do not merely preserve one culture or adopt another; instead, they construct hybrid identities that transcend rigid cultural boundaries. Stuart Hall’s theory views identity as a process of “becoming” rather than “being.” Identity continuously evolves through historical experiences, migration, and cultural interactions.

Avtar Brah’s concept of **diaspora space** emphasizes that migration reshapes both homeland and hostland identities. Diasporic communities inhabit multiple social and cultural locations simultaneously. James Clifford further argues that diaspora should not be understood solely through displacement but also through routes, movement, and transnational networks. These theoretical perspectives collectively illuminate how immigrant identities remain fluid, negotiated, and relational.

## Immigration and the Construction of Identity

Migration disrupts familiar social structures and compels individuals to reconstruct their identities. For immigrants, identity involves negotiating race, ethnicity, nationality, language, religion, and memory. The first generation often experiences homesickness and cultural displacement, while the second generation struggles with bicultural identity. Parents seek to preserve traditions,

whereas children adapt more rapidly to American society. This intergenerational tension becomes one of the defining themes of immigrant fiction.

Language also functions as an important marker of identity. Speaking multiple languages enables immigrants to navigate different cultural contexts but simultaneously produces feelings of in-betweenness. Code-switching, translation, and multilingualism become literary techniques representing hybrid identity. Furthermore, race significantly influences immigrant experiences in America. Immigrants often encounter discrimination, stereotyping, and exclusion despite adopting American customs. Consequently, identity is shaped not only by personal choice but also by societal perceptions.

### **Cultural Hybridity in Jhumpa Lahiri**

Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction provides one of the most nuanced explorations of Indian-American identity. In *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake*, and *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri portrays characters negotiating between Bengali traditions and American modernity. *The Namesake* illustrates the identity crisis of Gogol Ganguli, whose unusual name symbolizes his cultural ambiguity. Neither fully Indian nor entirely American, Gogol struggles to define himself within competing cultural expectations. His eventual acceptance of his hybrid identity reflects the maturation of the immigrant self.

Lahiri presents first-generation immigrants as emotionally attached to India while second-generation characters increasingly identify with American culture. Nevertheless, complete assimilation remains impossible because ethnic identity continues to shape social experiences.

Food, festivals, clothing, and family rituals become symbols of cultural continuity. Simultaneously, American education, relationships, and professional life encourage cultural adaptation. Lahiri therefore portrays identity as an ongoing negotiation rather than a fixed destination.

### **Race and Belonging in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah***

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* examines immigration through the experiences of Ifemelu, a Nigerian woman living in the United States. Upon arriving in America, Ifemelu discovers that she becomes "Black" in ways she had never experienced in Nigeria. Race becomes a socially constructed identity imposed upon immigrants. Adichie explores how immigrant identity intersects with gender, class, and race. Ifemelu's blog on race humorously critiques American multiculturalism while exposing persistent inequalities.

Hair functions as an important cultural symbol throughout the novel. Ifemelu's decision to embrace her natural African hair represents resistance against assimilationist pressures. Likewise, language, accent, and education become markers through which immigrants negotiate acceptance. The novel ultimately rejects the notion that successful immigration requires abandoning one's cultural roots. Instead, Adichie emphasizes authenticity and self-acceptance.

### **Memory, Trauma, and Exile in Viet Thanh Nguyen**

Viet Thanh Nguyen's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Sympathizer* explores the experiences of Vietnamese refugees

following the Vietnam War. Unlike traditional immigrant narratives focused solely on assimilation, Nguyen foregrounds political displacement and historical trauma. His unnamed narrator lives between opposing ideological worlds, embodying divided identity. Memory becomes central to immigrant identity. Refugees carry histories of war, violence, and displacement that shape their psychological lives even after migration.

Nguyen critiques American narratives that often reduce immigrants to passive victims. Instead, he presents complex individuals negotiating multiple political and cultural affiliations. The protagonist's inability to fully belong either to Vietnam or America illustrates the enduring ambiguity of diasporic identity.

### **Global Migration in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West***

Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* offers a contemporary meditation on migration in a globalized world. Using magical realism, Hamid imagines doors that instantly transport refugees across international borders. This narrative device shifts attention away from physical travel toward psychological transformation. Nadia and Saeed experience changing identities as they move through multiple countries. Migration alters relationships, cultural practices, and perceptions of home.

Hamid challenges nationalist conceptions of belonging by suggesting that migration is becoming a universal human condition. Rather than emphasizing assimilation, the novel celebrates adaptability and human resilience. The "hyphenated self" in *Exit West* becomes increasingly fluid, reflecting globalization's erosion of fixed national identities.

### **Language as Identity**

Language occupies a central position in immigrant fiction. For many immigrant characters, language symbolizes both opportunity and loss. English facilitates social mobility while distancing individuals from their mother tongues. Lahiri portrays bilingual conversations that reflect emotional intimacy within immigrant families. Adichie highlights accent discrimination, demonstrating how pronunciation becomes linked to social acceptance.

Nguyen incorporates Vietnamese expressions that preserve cultural memory, while Hamid employs universalized language to emphasize global interconnectedness. Thus, multilingualism becomes an important literary strategy representing hybrid identities.

### **Family, Generational Conflict, and Identity**

Family relationships significantly influence immigrant identity formation. Parents often seek to preserve cultural traditions through language, religion, marriage, and food. Children, however, frequently adopt American values regarding individualism, romance, and professional aspirations. This generational divide appears prominently in Lahiri's fiction, where children resist parental expectations yet later rediscover cultural heritage. Adichie's characters similarly negotiate parental authority while embracing independent identities. The family therefore becomes the primary site where competing cultural values interact.

## Gender and the Hyphenated Self

discrimination within host societies. Ifemelu, Nadia, and Lahiri's female characters challenge conventional gender roles through education, employment, and personal autonomy. Their experiences reveal that immigrant identity cannot be understood independently of gender, class, and race. Intersectionality therefore becomes crucial in analysing contemporary immigrant fiction.

## The American Dream Reconsidered

Traditional immigrant narratives celebrated the American Dream as a pathway toward prosperity and assimilation. Contemporary writers present a more nuanced perspective. Economic opportunities coexist with racial discrimination, cultural isolation, and identity conflicts. Although many immigrant characters achieve educational or professional success, emotional belonging remains elusive. The American Dream thus transforms from economic achievement into the search for personal authenticity.

## Hybridity as Resistance

Rather than viewing hybrid identity as cultural confusion, contemporary fiction increasingly presents hybridity as creative resistance. Hybrid identities challenge nationalist boundaries and reject binary oppositions such as East versus West, native versus foreign, or tradition versus modernity. Characters create new cultural practices that combine elements from multiple traditions. Food, music, language, fashion, and interpersonal relationships all reflect cultural synthesis rather than cultural replacement. Hybridity therefore becomes a source of empowerment.

## Conclusion

Contemporary American fiction portrays immigrant identity as dynamic, fluid, and multifaceted. The "hyphenated self" represents neither divided loyalty nor incomplete assimilation but rather the creative negotiation of multiple cultural affiliations. Through the works of Jhumpa Lahiri, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Viet Thanh Nguyen, and Mohsin Hamid, immigrant identity emerges as a continual process shaped by migration, memory, race, language, family, and globalization. These writers challenge assimilationist narratives by demonstrating that belonging does not require abandoning one's cultural heritage. Instead, hybrid identities enrich American society by expanding definitions of nationhood and citizenship.

Ultimately, contemporary immigrant fiction celebrates diversity while acknowledging the emotional complexities of migration. The hyphen becomes not a symbol of separation but a bridge connecting cultures, histories, and identities.

Gender further complicates immigrant identity. Female immigrant protagonists often confront patriarchal expectations inherited from their homelands alongside racial and gender

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