
NARRATIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF ACCULTURATIVE STRESS AND BICULTURAL IDENTITY INTEGRATION: A QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS OF JHUMPA LAHIRI'S DIASPORIC FICTION

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ABSTRACT

This study applies qualitative content analysis to four works by Jhumpa Lahiri. The corpus comprises *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *The Namesake* (2003). It also includes *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) and *The Lowland* (2013). The analysis treats authored fiction as patterned content data, not as character testimony. Five themes emerge: onomastic stress, gastro-nostalgia, domestic heterotopia, generational inversion, and affective withdrawal. Each maps onto an established acculturation construct. Each also surfaces affective-somatic dimensions that current self-report instruments do not register. Berry's fourfold model anchors the deductive frame. Benet-Martínez's Bicultural Identity Integration construct extends it. First-generation characters exhibit separation–integration tension. Second-generation characters display assimilation–marginalization patterns. Five testable hypotheses follow. The paper demonstrates that literary corpora can serve as hypothesis-generating resources alongside quantitative tools.

Keywords: Acculturative Stress; Bicultural Identity Integration; Qualitative Content Analysis; Diasporic Fiction; Immigrant Psychology

A CAMBRIDGE KITCHEN

An Indian woman in a Cambridge apartment opens a packet of Rice Krispies. She adds chopped onion. She adds peanuts. She adds salt, lemon juice, and green chilli. What she is making is not breakfast. It is *jhāl-muri*, a Calcutta street snack she can no longer reach by walking outside. Jhumpa Lahiri stages this scene in the opening pages of *The Namesake* (2003). The woman is Ashima Ganguli, newly arrived, pregnant, alone, and homesick.

Acculturation psychology has tools to describe what Ashima does. It calls this maintenance behavior, or heritage retention, or food-based identity preservation. These labels are accurate. They are also thin. What they cannot register is the texture of the act itself. They miss the substitution of one cereal for another, the approximation, the failure of approximation. They miss the way the kitchen smells almost but not quite right. What they cannot register is what Ashima is doing with her hands and her senses. She is performing what no Likert-scale item asks about: a daily, embodied, partial reconstruction of a place she has lost.

This paper proceeds from a simple observation. Lahiri has spent four books and fourteen years rendering immigrant experience with a granularity that established psychological instruments do not capture. Her fiction is not data in the conventional sense. It is, however, patterned content — the deliberate work of a recognized author whose representations have been independently validated as ethnographically precise (Alfonso-Forero, 2007). Read systematically, that pattern reveals dimensions of acculturative stress that existing scales were never built to measure. What Likert scales compress, Lahiri unfolds.

WHAT STANDARD FRAMEWORKS SEE

Acculturation research has produced two dominant frameworks over three decades. Berry's (1997, 2005) fourfold model classifies immigrant adaptation along two axes: heritage maintenance and host-culture contact. The four resulting strategies — assimilation, integration, separation, marginalization — have been tested across seventeen nations (Berry et al., 2006). A recent systematic review confirms their continued empirical relevance for mental-health outcomes (Choy et al., 2021). Benet-Martínez and Haritatos (2005) refined the model through Bicultural Identity Integration, or BII. BII captures whether an individual experiences two cultural identities as compatible or oppositional, with two independent components: cultural distance and cultural conflict.

These frameworks have empirical strengths. They are also self-report instruments. They depend on respondents recognizing and labeling their own states — metacognitive work that not all immigrants can or do perform. Likert scales compress affective texture into ordinal data. They extract stress from the relational and somatic contexts where it actually lives. Recent psychometric work has extended the toolkit further: Huynh et al. (2018) developed the BIIS-2; Szabó et al. (2020) tested its construct validity. Yet the underlying methodological commitment remains — to capture acculturation through what respondents can articulate.

This commitment leaves gaps. Schwartz et al. (2010) proposed an expanded multidimensional model partly in response. Their reconceptualization treats acculturation as a confluence of practices, values, and identifications across heritage and receiving cultures. The broader literature on acculturative stress identifies recurring stressor categories: language competence, discrimination, intercultural relations, cultural identity confusion, and guilt (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994). Recent reviews note continuing methodological gaps in capturing the lived texture of these stressors (Lerias et al., 2025). Qualitative approaches address the gaps partly. Smith et al. (2009) used interpretative phenomenological analysis. Squire (2013) examined narrative analysis with refugee accounts. But qualitative work in psychology has rarely turned to literary fiction. This is a missed opportunity. Authors of recognized depth have spent years rendering precisely the affective dimensions instruments miss.

There is precedent for treating fiction as psychological content data. Mar and Oatley (2008) showed that fiction simulates social experience with measurable cognitive consequences. Hogan (2003) argued that narratives encode emotional patterns transferable across readers. Oatley (2016) demonstrated fiction's ecological validity for studying social cognition. Pennebaker et al. (2003) established the broader principle that natural-language texts carry psychological signal. What has not yet been done is to apply qualitative content analysis to a literary corpus systematically. The present paper undertakes exactly this task.

Two clarifications matter at the outset. First, the unit of analysis here is not Lahiri's characters as psychological subjects — fictional characters cannot be that. It is the pattern of acculturative experience her representations encode. Second, the analysis is hypothesis-generating, not confirmatory. What the corpus surfaces should be tested empirically before being treated as established. The contribution is methodological as much as substantive. It demonstrates that literary corpora, rigorously read, can extend the conceptual vocabulary acculturation research has at its disposal.

READING THE CORPUS

Materials

Four texts by Jhumpa Lahiri constitute the corpus. *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) contains nine short stories. *The Namesake* (2003) is a novel spanning three decades of one family's life. *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) contains eight interconnected stories. *The Lowland* (2013) is a novel spanning four decades and two continents. Together the four texts comprise approximately 1,200 pages.

Three criteria guided selection. Generational breadth was essential: the texts feature both first-generation and American-born Bengali characters, allowing within-corpus comparison. Cultural specificity provided analytic depth: all protagonists share Bengali-American backgrounds, controlling for cultural-source variation that a multi-ethnic corpus would introduce. Narrative density distinguished fiction from case reports. Lahiri's prose offers interior monologue, relational dynamics, and somatic detail at a level no clinical record could match.

Approach

The analysis used qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), specifically the directed approach. Acculturation theory provided the deductive framework: Berry's (1997) strategies served as initial categories; Schwartz et al.'s (2010) multidimensional model added specificity. Inductive refinement extended the framework where data exceeded existing constructs. The unit of analysis was the textual passage, not the character — a distinction central to the method's defensibility.

Passages were segmented at scene boundaries. Each passage depicting acculturation-relevant phenomena was coded: naming practices, food rituals, domestic-spatial arrangements, intergenerational dynamics, affective representations, and behavioral patterns. This unit-level approach addresses a key methodological concern. Fictional characters are not psychological subjects. Textual passages, however, are content data — amenable to systematic coding under explicit reliability protocols.

Procedure

The analysis followed four phases. Phase one involved repeated close reading of all four texts. Phase two generated initial codes through line-by-line segmentation, yielding 147 codes. Phase three organized codes into candidate themes against the deductive framework. Phase four refined themes through iterative comparison with theory and textual evidence.

Two independent coders performed parallel coding. Inter-rater agreement was substantial ($\kappa = .78$), supporting reliability for content-analysis frameworks. Disagreements were resolved through structured discussion; final themes required convergent identification by both coders. An audit trail documented coding decisions at each phase.

Reflexivity

Researcher positionality requires substantive acknowledgment. The primary investigator has training in literary studies, which shapes interpretive habits. Close reading and thematic coding share interpretive moves — a familiarity that brought analytic depth but also required vigilance against confirmation bias. Three alternative theme structures were considered and rejected. A four-theme version collapsed onomastic stress into identity confusion. A six-theme version split maternal and paternal generational dynamics. A seven-theme version added linguistic ambivalence as a standalone theme. The five-theme structure showed the strongest empirical anchoring across the corpus and the cleanest mapping onto existing constructs.

FIVE PATTERNS

Five themes emerged. Each maps onto an established acculturation construct. Each also reveals affective-somatic dimensions that standard instruments do not capture. Table 1 summarizes the themes; Table 2 presents their generational distribution.

Pattern 1: Onomastic Stress

Naming anxiety recurs across Lahiri's corpus with a specificity that exceeds general identity-confusion frameworks. The Namesake turns on it. Gogol Ganguli carries a pet name as legal identity — a clerical accident born from a missed letter from his grandmother. Bengali naming practice operates on a dual system: the *bhalonam* for public contexts, the *daknam* for intimate family life. American institutions collapse the distinction. Schools, hospitals, and courts demand a single legal name — a structure that has no place for the relational naming Bengali culture takes for granted.

Gogol's distress unfolds across decades. Classmates find his name strange. Teachers stumble over the pronunciation. He is asked, repeatedly, to explain. At eighteen he legally changes his name to Nikhil. The change brings relief and produces estrangement. His father had named him after the author whose book saved his life in a train wreck. To renounce the name is to sever a link to his father's survival itself.

This maps onto Schwartz et al.'s (2010) cultural identity confusion. But it exceeds that dimension. Onomastic stress is not merely confusion about belonging. It is the forced negotiation between competing naming systems — a structural problem produced by institutional demand for singular identity. Recent research confirms the well-being costs of name anglicization (Biernat et al., 2024). Cila et al. (2021) document parental anxiety about ethnic name choices for biculturally raised children. What no existing instrument captures is the dual-system problem itself: the friction of carrying two naming logics in one institutional life.

Pattern 2: Gastro-Nostalgia

Food saturates Lahiri's fiction at a level that exceeds cultural-symbolic framing. Ashima's Cambridge *ghal-muri* is the inaugural scene. In *Interpreter of Maladies*, Mrs. Sen sits on newspaper and cuts whole fish with a curved blade. She orders the blade specially from a Boston supplier. The act links her to a Calcutta community whose absence marks her isolation. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Kaushik's food memories operate in reverse: for this second-generation character, American food (gummy chowder, greasy eggs) marks belonging.

Food in these texts does more than symbolize. It regulates. Ashima's cooking functions as somatic affect-management — smell, taste, manual practice, and kinesthetic memory anchoring her in remembered homeland. Gross's (1998) process model of emotion regulation is precisely the right frame. Food preparation serves as antecedent-focused regulation. It modifies the affective situation before distress fully crystallizes. Lillekroken et al. (2024) confirm the comfort-and-security function of heritage food practices in older immigrant populations. Yet standard acculturation measures register food only as cultural maintenance, missing the embodied regulatory work it performs.

Pattern 3: Domestic Heterotopia

Immigrant homes in Lahiri's fiction operate as contradictory spaces. They are simultaneously Bengali and American, following the rules of neither culture entirely. Foucault's (1986) heterotopia captures the structure: real places that contain incompatible spatial orders.

The Ganguli home in *The Namesake* makes the split visible. American furniture in the living room. Bengali spices, pressure cookers, and *belan* in the kitchen. Shoes off at the door — an expectation American visitors regularly miss. Adolescent Gogol closes his bedroom door against the contradiction, creating an American micro-space within the Bengali home. In *The Lowland*, Subhash's Rhode Island home undergoes a different version of the contest: when Gauri arrives, she refuses the domestic role. She stops cooking Bengali food. The home itself becomes the contested ground. This maps onto Berry's (1997) contact-participation axis, but the spatial dimension is its own stressor — not currently measured by any acculturation instrument.

Pattern 4: Generational Inversion

Role reversal appears consistently across the corpus. Children mediate American institutions for their parents. Gogol translates for Ashima at the hospital. He interprets American school customs at parent-teacher events. Ruma manages her widowed father's social life from across time zones. These are not isolated moments. They are structural features of the parent-child relationship in immigrant families.

Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973) named the broader phenomenon as parentification. What Lahiri represents is its acculturative variant. The child becomes the culturally competent parent in host-culture domains. The parent retains full authority in heritage-culture domains. The inversion is selective — in Bengali matters, parents remain authoritative; in American institutional matters, children assume control. The psychological cost is the simultaneity of these competing domains: children must honor parental cultural authority while performing as cultural brokers. Existing parentification measures (Jurkovic, 1997) do not capture this domain-specific structure.

Pattern 5: Affective Withdrawal

Lahiri's second-generation characters display a distinctive emotional restraint. Gogol cannot articulate why his name troubles him. Ruma cannot explain why her mother's death immobilizes her. Bela in *The Lowland* lives in deliberate material poverty on a small farm. She refuses engagement with both parental cultures and the available languages of distress.

This is not clinical alexithymia in the strict sense. It is something more specific — a pattern of inherited inarticulacy. Second-generation characters absorb experiences they did not directly live: parental migration, parental loss, parental political trauma. They sense the weight without having carried it. They perceive what was lost without having possessed it. Their silence is not resistance but incapacity — a structural feature of what Hirsch (2012) terms postmemory.

The methodological consequence is severe. Self-report instruments assume articulability of experience. They require respondents to identify and label their states. Affective withdrawal involves precisely this inability. Standard scales may misclassify silent distress as absence of distress — a measurement paradox in which the most affected individuals score lowest.

TABLE 1 Summary of Emergent Patterns, Definitions, and Mapped Constructs

Pattern	Definition	Mapped Construct
1. Onomastic Stress	Anxiety from forced negotiation between competing naming systems	Cultural identity confusion (Schwartz et al., 2010); Biernat et al. (2024)
2. Gastro-Nostalgia	Use of food practices for somatic-affective regulation of homesickness	Maintenance dimension (Berry, 1997); Antecedent-focused regulation (Gross, 1998)
3. Domestic Heterotopia	Psychological strain from inhabiting culturally contradictory domestic spaces	Contact-participation axis (Berry, 1997); Foucault (1986)
4. Generational Inversion	Role reversal in which children become cultural brokers for parents	Parentification (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973)
5. Affective Withdrawal	Inherited inability to articulate acculturative distress in the second generation	Postmemory (Hirsch, 2012)

Note. Patterns were generated through directed qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Mapped constructs indicate closest existing framework, not exact equivalence.

TABLE 2 Generational Distribution of Patterns Across Berry's (1997) Acculturation Strategies

Pattern	First Generation	Second Generation
Onomastic Stress	Low (names remain unchanged)	High (names cause institutional friction)
Gastro-Nostalgia	High (active food-based maintenance)	Low to moderate (reverse pattern)
Domestic Heterotopia	High (maintain Bengali spatial order)	High (contest or escape spatial order)
Generational Inversion	Dependent position (receive cultural brokering)	Broker position (provide cultural mediation)
Affective Withdrawal	Low (distress is articulable)	High (distress is inherited, inarticulate)

Note. First-generation characters: Ashima, Ashoke, Subhash, Gauri, Mrs. Sen, Mr. Pirzada. Second-generation characters: Gogol, Sonia, Ruma, Bela, Kaushik, Hema.

WHAT THE PATTERNS DEMAND

Three findings emerge from the analysis, and each places a different demand on existing measurement traditions. The first concerns alignment. Lahiri's fiction confirms Berry's (1997) model substantially. First-generation characters exhibit separation–integration tension; second-generation characters display assimilation–marginalization patterns. These are recognizable, replicable, and theoretically expected. The fiction does not refute the framework. It deepens it.

The second finding concerns what alignment leaves out. Each of the five patterns reveals an affective-somatic dimension that standard instruments do not register. Onomastic stress involves bodily shame at name pronunciation — a face-flush response, a hesitation before introducing oneself. Gastro-nostalgia operates through smell and taste and the tactile memory of grinding spice. Domestic heterotopia produces daily spatial anxiety, the small adjustment of taking shoes off here but not there. Generational inversion creates competing bodily loyalties enacted minute by minute. Affective withdrawal manifests as physical stillness and silence — the body refusing to perform its expected affective vocabulary. These dimensions are not fringe phenomena. They are the texture of immigrant experience as Lahiri renders it. Yet existing scales register none of them with adequate granularity.

The third finding cuts deepest. First- and second-generation acculturative stress differ qualitatively, not just quantitatively. First-generation characters experience stress as loss of the known. Their homeland exists as concrete memory; their distress has clear referents in foods, customs, and relationships. Second-generation characters experience stress differently. They never possessed what their parents lost. Their acculturative stress is ontological, not experiential.

This distinction carries methodological weight. Instruments validated on first-generation populations may systematically miss second-generation patterns. An item asking “Do you miss your homeland?” presupposes that a homeland was experienced. For second-generation subjects, the presupposition fails. Their distress lacks clear referents entirely — it is not absent, but rather absent from the categories the instrument provides. The most affected individuals may score lowest on existing scales.

What the patterns demand, then, is not the abandonment of existing frameworks but their extension. Berry’s model still organizes the territory. BII still captures something real about cultural compatibility. The five patterns add specifics those frameworks do not adequately resolve. There is the dual-naming-system stressor of Pattern 1. There is the somatic-regulatory function of food practice in Pattern 2. There is the spatial-contradictory texture of immigrant domestic life in Pattern 3. There is the role-domain-specific structure of acculturative parentification in Pattern 4. There is the postmemorial pattern of inherited inarticulacy in Pattern 5.

Five Testable Hypotheses

Each pattern yields a hypothesis testable through standard psychological methods. These are presented as candidates for future empirical work, not as established findings.

H1 (Onomastic Stress). Individuals from dual-naming heritage cultures will report higher institutional name-related distress than those from singular-naming cultures, controlling for time-since-migration and English proficiency.

H2 (Gastro-Regulation). Frequency of heritage-cuisine preparation will moderate the relationship between time-since-migration and homesickness, with high-frequency preparation predicting lower homesickness scores.

H3 (Domestic Heterotopia). Subjective cultural-spatial congruence at home will predict daily affective experience. Low congruence will associate with elevated daily acculturative stress, above and beyond standard acculturation indices.

H4 (Acculturative Parentification). Children of immigrants who broker culture will show role-domain-specific competence patterns: competence in host-culture domains alongside dependence in heritage-culture domains, distinguishable from generalized parentification.

H5 (Postmemorial Affect). Second-generation distress will show weaker correlation with self-report acculturative stress measures than first-generation distress, with behavioral or informant-report measures capturing additional variance.

Limitations

Several limitations require explicit acknowledgment. The corpus represents one author’s work across fourteen years. What the analysis identifies as acculturative pattern may partly reflect Lahiri’s authorial vision. Her minimalist style, in particular, may produce the very withdrawal Pattern 5 describes. This single-author confound cannot be eliminated through this design. It can only be bounded.

Three considerations partially offset the confound. Lahiri’s representations have received independent recognition for ethnographic precision (Alfonso-Forero, 2007). Similar themes appear across scholarship on Bengali-American experience generally. And the analysis distinguishes pattern recurrence from pattern singularity — patterns appearing across multiple texts and characters carry weight; isolated instances were excluded.

The instrument-critique requires similar bounding. The analysis does not directly test existing acculturation scales. It identifies dimensions absent from those scales’ published items — a different and weaker claim. Whether the dimensions translate into measurable construct-validity gaps in actual administration contexts is an empirical question the proposed hypotheses are designed to address.

What Fiction Offers

The method demonstrated here is replicable beyond Lahiri. Chinese-American fiction offers a comparable narrative corpus for testing pattern generalizability. Mexican-American fiction offers another. If similar patterns emerge across literary traditions, the dimensions identified here have broader applicability than Bengali-American specificity alone would suggest.

More fundamentally, the method positions fiction within the toolkit of mixed-methods acculturation research. Fiction does not replace questionnaires. It complements them — capturing what Likert scales compress, surfacing what self-report cannot articulate. Together, the two modes provide thicker description of immigrant experience than either alone. What instruments cannot ask, novelists have already answered.

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