

# **Intercultural Aspect of Immigrant Adaptation in Jhumpa Lahiri's *This Blessed House***

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## **ABSTRACT**

Globalization processes and active international contacts caused the need for effective social politics aimed at promoting global stability. The latest decades saw the transition from traditional multiculturalism to transculturalism. Transcultural approach brings to light what is common notwithstanding the existing cultural differences. Thus cultures are viewed as related entities and communication as the most important dimension of transculturalism. Modern literature also acquired transcultural features. The works created by migrant writers function as a means of communication between different cultural communities. The study aims to analyse the features of immigrant cultural adaptation in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel "This Blessed House". The difference between the author's native culture and the culture she lives in provides the possibility to describe the society from both insider's and outsider's perspective. The multicultural trends influence the author's personality resulting in the variety of images, associations and beliefs applied in the literary text. Intercultural relationship is the most vividly presented when it comes to the perception of cultural units. In the story "This Blessed House" they comprise culture-specific items, traditions, cultural values and artefacts. Their contextual setting contains characters' attitudes, judgements and opinions expressing cultural, social and religious beliefs. The main characters, a young Indian couple, illustrate totally different ways of cultural adaptation. The discovery of some Christian artefacts left by the previous owners in the house provokes their specific feelings and behaviour. As a result, Sanjeev and Twinkle demonstrate completely different attitudes towards religious beliefs, their native culture and traditions. Having lived in America for quite a long period, Sanjeev stays faithful to Indian culture and highly appreciates the rules of patriarchal society. He refuses to let the "other" culture into his life notwithstanding the desire to fit in. Twinkle, on the contrary, possesses "chameleonic" ability to adapt. Her unwillingness to obey patriarchal rules, passion for Christian artefacts and respect for other religion are harmoniously combined with the faithfulness to her native Indian culture. The girl respects her parents and their will, she wears traditional clothes, learns to cook traditional dishes and is able to live up to current moment without focusing on the otherness of American society and her personal distinctions. Twinkle acts as a cultural broker mediating the relationship between the cultures encountering and demonstrates gradual shifting to transculturalism.

**Keywords:** *multiculturalism, interculturalism, transculturalism, multicultural literary discourse, culture-specific items, cultural artefacts.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Globalization processes have promoted active migrations and gradual blurring of cultural boundaries. The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw the shift from traditional westernization of societies to penetration of eastern values into the culture of the West. G. Rachman views easternization as a modern and powerful trend transforming the lives of people all over the world and promoting global instability [1].

Ethnic and religious diversity within a modern society suggests its essential characteristics: complexity, mobility and openness. The way of perceiving culture as a homogeneous entity (as cited in R.J. Schmidt [2]) no longer reflects its contemporary state. Various terms, such as multiculturalism, interculturalism, transculturalism are applied to define culture with a regard to its diversity.

Multiculturalism traditionally calls for tolerance in the process of the perception of the “other”. The idea was designed for the sake of balance and peaceful coexistence of ethnic groups and was expected to provide penetration, enrichment of different cultures as well as the formation of a new mass culture. Though, multicultural approach concentrated rather on cultural differences than similarities. A. Benessaïeh asserts that ethnic communities were viewed stereotypically as separate ones and the desired diversity was substituted with amalgamation [3]. Thus groups deprived of social identity strive for specifics and try to outline contours and contents of their culture. Integration as an expected result of multicultural policy turns to be impossible and sometimes may be transformed into segregation [4].

Even though the conception of multiculturalism was criticized it was not denied completely. The idea was just altered and the process of immigrants’ integration was made its key point. The global community shifted from multiculturalism to interculturalism which is aimed at the interaction, establishment of common interests between cultures and evoking the sense of responsibility for common future [5]. Multiculturalism and interculturalism make emphasis on the dualistic relations where the dominant culture and the minorities can be singled out. Both approaches are viewed as ineffective because of their monocultural character.

Transculturality proves that monocultural society is an idealistic concept within historical and geographical boundaries. “Pure” culture nowadays is impossible taking into account globalization processes. F. Ortiz claims that communication is the most important dimension of transculturality [6]. Otherness in the process of communication is not regarded as a hindrance to be removed, but rather as an individual peculiarity. It may cause some misunderstanding and prevent the synthesis of two cultures, but will provide interaction and transculturation.

Relatedness is a core of transculturality. Cultures are not viewed as isolated structures or autonomous systems. Transcultural approach brings to light what is common notwithstanding the existing differences.

Being “multicultural” doesn’t fulfill the requirements laid on the modern society. Individuals and communities face the need of high mobility, quick adaptivity and constant enrichment of code variety in order to fit the moment irrespective of location or context. P. Iyer perceives that these abilities are included in the concept of transculturality which can be called “a chameleonic capacity” [7]. According to A. Benessaïeh the term can be applied to “those

individuals who, by virtue of a mixed background or lived experience, participate in a plurality of actively connected flows and worlds” [3]. Immigrant writers are the brightest representatives of this social group, constantly manifesting cultural experience in their literary works.

Modern literature as well as politics and economy became transcultural. The works created by migrant writers belong to “mongrel literature” [8], which functions as a means of communication between different cultural communities. The difference between the author’s native culture and the culture he lives in provides the possibility to describe the society from both insider’s and outsider’s perspective.

Mongrel literature is a kind of cross-cultural communication illustrating interaction and opposition of ethnic and transcultural author’s identity. Ideological and religious hybridity, mixture of Western and Eastern traditions are the characteristic features of this literary discourse. The author’s artistic style within a multicultural fiction text is based on ethnic and religious identity, demonstrates his transculturality as well as history and culture of his nation and specific image of the world. Thus the author acts as an interpreter between two cultures and their mentalities, creating a unique multicultural artistic space.

Multicultural literary discourse provides the possibility to study the linguistic peculiarities of multicultural world perception. The scope of researcher’s attention includes cultural symbols, allusions, culture-specific items, archetypes, which embody the oldest ideas of people about the universe and their place in it, mythologemes typical of Western and Eastern cultures, reminiscences, citations and borrowings as important forms of author’s identity reflection. Other aspects of multicultural discourse include ideological, historical and social components, nonverbal means of discourse presentation (mimics, gestures etc.), evaluative component (both implicit and explicit) etc. The multicultural trends influence the author’s personality resulting in the variety of images, associations and beliefs applied in the literary text. The images, created within different cultures and denoting the same notions, do not coincide. Thus the distinguishing features “contribute to the formation of the unique picture of the world, appearing in the mind of the person who remains on the cultural crossroad” [9].

The process of immigrant cultural adaptation remains the focus of multicultural literary discourse and is defined as “the adaptation to the new contexts that involves the integration of identities and social

and cultural systems in that context” [10]. This process presupposes adaptation to various life domains, dealing with different cultural scripts and demands. The analysis of outcomes provided in the literary text enables the judgments about successfulness/unsuccessfulness of immigrant cultural adaptation, defines its degree and provides the opportunity to observe its stages.

The creative work of an American author Jhumpa Lahiri is a vivid example of a multicultural discourse. She was born in London, the daughter of Indian immigrants from the Indian state of West Bengal. Her family moved to the United States when she was three. Her debut short story collection, “Interpreter of Maladies”, was released in 1999. The stories touch upon the problems of Indian immigrants including difficulties of social and cultural adaptation, lack of understanding between different generations of immigrants, marital problems etc. The story “This Blessed House” is no exception and provides the vivid example of social transition from multiculturalism to transculturality within a young Indian family couple.

The purpose of the research is to study the peculiarities of the main characters’ cultural adaptation in J. Lahiri’s story and to trace the shift to different manner of perception of the “other”.

## 2. METHODS

The research data were collected by means of the close reading technique. This method focused on language units related to cultural specifics. Thus definite groups of units denoting culture-specific items, traditions, values and cultural artefacts were singled out. These items traditionally mediate the perceptions about the cultural world.

The contextual analysis is applied to discover the textual setting of culturally meaningful linguistic units. The method enables us to discover characters’ individual cultural orientations and values.

The selected data are also studied using stylistic analysis. The defined types of stylistic means and devices are used in emotionally charged textual parts, conveying the characters’ mood and attitudes.

The descriptive method was combined with the text interpretation methodology and used for decoding implicit meanings.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The story “This Blessed House” tells about a young Indian couple, Sanjeev and Twinkle, who have

just married and moved into their new house in Connecticut. As they clean and arrange things they keep finding some Christian artefacts left by the previous owners. The conflict of the story appears when young people demonstrate completely different attitudes towards religious beliefs, their native culture and traditions.

### 3.1. Culture-specific items in the literary text

In the literary text cultural diversity manifests itself through words and phrases which can be viewed as cultural units. P. Newmark refers to them as *cultural words* [11], D. Robinson employs the terms *realia* and *culture-bound phenomena* [12], E. Davies names them *culture-specific items* (CSI) [13]. Such variations are also observed in the definition of this lexical group. M. Baker suggests the following: “the source language word may express a concept which is totally unknown in the target culture. The concept in question may be abstract or concrete; it may relate to a religious belief, a social custom, or even a type of food. Such concepts are often referred to as *culture specific*” [14].

In fiction characters express their cultural background through culture-specific items (CSI). E. Espindola distinguishes ten categories of CSI under the following headings: anthroponyms, toponyms, forms of entertainment, means of transportation, fictional character, local institution, measuring system, food and drink, scholastic reference, religious celebration [15]. These categories cover the most important spheres of human life and contribute to conveying cultural specifics.

In “This Blessed House” the main characters have Indian names – *Sanjeev* and *Tanima*, though the girl doesn’t like hers and prefers to be called Twinkle, named after the nursery rhyme and sounding “more American”. Toponyms *Jaipur* and *Calcutta* are used to describe location. The description of characters’ appearance includes the names of items of traditional Indian clothes: *sari*, *salwar-kameez*. Twinkle wearing national clothes for their housewarming party really attracts everyone’s attention: *But most of all they admired Twinkle, and her brocaded salwar-kameez, which was the shade of a persimmon with a low scoop in the back and the little string of white rose petals she had coiled cleverly around her head, and the pearl choker with a sapphire at its center that adorned her throat* [16, p. 166].

Another group of CSI comprises names of traditional dishes: *Mughlai chicken*, *curry*, *samosa*. These lexical units are followed by comments expressing the attitude of the main characters towards

the Indian cuisine and culture in general. Sanjeev's remarks contain various epithets describing traditional dishes: *favourite, proper, unusually tasty, attractive* etc. which illustrates that he really adores national cuisine and the process of cooking. Twinkle's attitude is completely different: *Indian food, she complained, was a bother; she detested chopping garlic, and peeling ginger, and could not operate a blender, and so it was Sanjeev who, on weekends, seasoned mustard oil with cinnamon sticks and cloves in order to produce a proper curry* [16, p. 156]. The context of the cultural background of the main characters becomes the foreground for Twinkle's negative evaluation of her roots, which is traced in the author's choice of words: she *detested* and *could not operate*.

Sanjeev, more traditional and conscious about his Indian roots, views his wife's behaviour as inappropriate and can't really understand how Twinkle can serve a pre-roasted chicken from a supermarket and potato salad in plastic containers for supper. The reader becomes conscious that the main character would rather have a truly Indian wife: *He thought with a flicker of regret of the snapshots his mother used to send him from Calcutta, of prospective brides who could sing and sew and season lentils without consulting a cookbook* [16, p. 159].

### 3.2. Traditions and cultural values

C. Barker defines culture as "the actual grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages and customs of any specific society" [17]. Culture is concerned with the way in which a certain society makes sense of the world. These specific features are fixed by different signs, of which language is the most significant. The study of linguistic peculiarities of multicultural discourse provides the understanding of rules, values and customs contributing to the construction of social order.

Jhumpa Lahiri describes some of Indian marital traditions and family values. The main characters being grown-ups and living apart from their families marry according to their parents' will in four months after their first meeting. Sanjeev considers his wife a good match, talks about love, though this feeling seems to appear out of some material aspects:

*Now he had one, a pretty one, from a suitably high caste, who would soon have a master's degree. What was there not to love?* [16, p. 161].

The man tells about his superior position before the wedding as he *considered women* and even *ranked them in order of preference*. The prospective brides are implicitly compared to objects. The status of a married

woman doesn't seem to be much better as she is expected to devote herself to her family. It turns out that on the one hand Sanjeev is proud to have a wife with a master's degree, but on the other – all that he expects from her is cooking and keeping their house clean. In this way, Sanjeev displays the archetypical ideas of family life, which imply patriarchal relations, thereby superiority of a man over a woman [18].

*...then she placed the statue on top of the fireplace mantel, which needed, Sanjeev observed, to be dusted. By the end of the week the mantel had still not been dusted...* [16, p. 149].

*You could unpack some boxes. You could sweep the attic. You could retouch the paint on the bathroom windowsill, and after you do it you could warn me so that I don't put my watch on it. They didn't bother her, these scattered, unsettled matters* [16, p. 153].

The usage of epiphora and anaphoric parallel constructions contributes to expressing Sanjeev's irritation and disappointment, as well as reproach addressed to his wife who ignores the rules of patriarchal society. The usage of Passive voice (*to be dusted, had still not been dusted*) has an additional contextual meaning of the man's superior position in his cultural tradition.

### 3.3. Discovering culture through artefacts

Object oriented philosophy [19] distinguishes the ability of material objects to have the expression beyond their physical properties and function. C. Adams acknowledges that "things gather (assemble) and stay (stabilize and sustain) human practices. Each new thing congregates us differently, involving us in new practices and ways of being and knowing the world" [20]. T. Dant views material objects as means of connecting people, as "we express ourselves as a part of society through the way we live with and use objects" [21].

Christian artefacts are found by the newlyweds as they explore their house. Both Sanjeev and Twinkle are Hindus, but it can't be said for sure as they never explicitly display their beliefs. Though, the text vividly describes their attitude towards Christianity. Twinkle becomes really interested in religious items and adores each of them. Her admiration is expressed by epithets: *pretty, important, spectacular, lovely* etc. The girl is agitated with her discoveries and considers them valuable: *And now all of her curiosity centered around discovering the next treasure* [16, p. 154].

On the contrary, her husband doesn't like the appearance of Christian artefacts in his house and expresses his resentment calling them *idiotic, silly, nonsense*. He can't understand his wife's behaviour and seems completely uninterested in material objects of other culture and religion: *Clearly they lacked a sense of sacredness. He was further puzzled that Twinkle, who normally displayed good taste, was so charmed* [16, p. 150]. Later appears that those objects evoke unpleasant feelings in Sanjeev, as practically every reference to them is followed by the verb *to irritate* to describe his reaction. The traces of irritation can be noticed when the man tells about the collection:

*There was a 3-D postcard of Saint Francis done in four colors, which Twinkle had found taped to the back of the medicine cabinet, and a wooden cross key chain, which Sanjeev had stepped on with bare feet as he was installing extra shelving in Twinkle's study. There was a framed paint-by-number of the three wise men, against a black velvet background, tucked in the linen closet. There was also a tile trivet depicting a blond, unbearded Jesus...* [16, p. 149].

The stylistic device of enumeration combined with anaphoric repetition of the construction *there was* creates the atmosphere of tension, annoyance and excessiveness.

Another feeling provoked is contempt. The young man calls the collection of material objects carefully displayed by his wife on the mantel piece *a biblical menagerie*, thus ignoring their sacredness and importance implied in other culture. It can be proved by Sanjeev's constant desire to get rid of them:

*For now I am going to put it [a statue of the Virgin Mary] in the garage. Then tomorrow morning on my way to work I am going to take it to the dump* [16, p. 162]. In the given example the object of material culture is compared to garbage. The author makes it clear that for Sanjeev Christian artefacts are of no importance and he either feels irritated about them or treats them like quite ordinary things not even worth anyone's attention.

*Sanjeev had mistaken it [a poster of Christ] for a window shade* [16, p. 151].

*Each time he passed the mantel he winced, dreading the raised eyebrows of his guests as they viewed the flickering ceramic saints, the salt and pepper shakers designed to resemble Mary and Joseph. Still, they would be impressed, he hoped, by the lovely bay windows, the shining parquet floors, the impressive winding staircase, the wooden wainscoting...* [16, p. 164].

As seen in the previous quote, the young man thinks it's the interior of the house that really deserves attention and not the "treasures" found by his wife.

Sanjeev's opposition to Christianity is so strong that when it comes to questions about religious beliefs of his family he doesn't just call his wife and himself Hindus, but states that they are not Christian. The phrase "*We're not Christian*" is recurrent in the text and used by Sanjeev either as the answer to his friends question or the reminder for his wife who seems to be too fascinated with Christian culture. The socio-cultural context of the interaction, in which Sanjeev repeats the phrase contributes to his implied negative evaluation of the situation the couple found themselves. Multicultural literary discourse analysis acknowledges that a lot of meanings in the communication are implicit due to socio-pragmatic reasons: the desire to "save the face", be polite, presence of other people [22].

The clash of two cultures is accentuated throughout the whole story at different levels.

The difference in perception of other culture is illustrated by the following parallel construction:

*These objects meant something to Twinkle, but they meant nothing to him* [16, p. 150].

The indefinite pronoun *something* conveys the lack of definite understanding of sacredness of found material objects on Twinkle's part. At the very beginning she treats Christian artifacts as ordinary objects possessing no material or cultural value. It is illustrated by the following quote:

*Twinkle walked into the living room, waving the vinegar in one hand and a white porcelain effigy of Christ, roughly the same size as the vinegar bottle, in the other* [16, p. 148].

The usage of a parallel construction underlines the same size and position of the objects, showing the complete lack of effigy's importance. Even when Sanjeev suggests throwing both things away Twinkle tries to protect the bottle of vinegar first, thinking it may come in use. New discoveries seem to change her attitude, the girl becomes interested and doesn't treat them so neglectfully. When Twinkle finds some new artefacts the author describes her as *charmed, curious, agitated*. Her actions, when dealing with the objects, are *careful, gentle, patient, slowly* etc. The girl is proud to have items of other culture in her house and eagerly displays them. Sanjeev on the contrary considers it to be shameful and is afraid to be mocked by his neighbors and colleagues. His wife views her

possessions as the means of becoming the part of American and Christian culture:

*“But we must. It would be bad luck not to.”*

*“All the neighbors will see. They’ll think we’re insane.”*

*“Why, for having a statue of the Virgin Mary on our lawn? Every other person in this neighborhood has a statue of Mary on the lawn. We’ll fit right in.”*

*“We’re not Christian.”*

*“So you keep reminding me.” [16, p. 159].*

The verb *to fit in* used by Twinkle precisely expresses the core idea of transculturalism. It was designed to make every member of multicultural society feel comfortable, do not concentrate on distinguishing features of his own culture, respect and accept the otherness around. The main character starts to realize the sacredness of the material objects of Christianity, believing in their ability to influence human life.

*Please. I would feel terrible throwing them away. Obviously they were important to the people who used to live here. It would feel, I don’t know, sacrilegious or something [16, p. 151].*

The given quote shows that Twinkle starts to associate all the objects found in the house with religion, understands their importance and respects the feelings of the previous owners. While Sanjeev feels irritated with the variety of Christian artefacts constantly being found, his wife considers it to be a great luck and calls the house *blessed*.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Due to ethnic and religious diversity within a modern society, culture no longer can be perceived as a homogeneous entity. The need to choose the right strategy in the process of perception of the “other” became really urgent in the last decades. Multicultural and intercultural approaches were proved to be ineffective because of their monocultural character, though their progressive ideas contributed to the emerging of transculturality.

Transcultural approach doesn’t view cultures as isolated structures and brings to light what is common notwithstanding the existing differences. The concept of transculturality includes the ability to adapt to different contexts, enriching the code variety.

Constantly influenced by global processes, modern literature acquires transcultural traces. “Mongrel literature” is a vivid example of cross-cultural

communication and a fruitful basis for the research of the linguistic peculiarities of multicultural world perception. The analysis of the story “The Blessed House” by an American author of Indian origin J. Lahiri provides the possibility to study the specific features of the main characters’ cultural adaptation and to trace the shift to different manner of perception of the “other”.

The story tells about a young Indian couple, Sanjeev and Twinkle, who moved into their new house in Connecticut. As they clean and arrange things they keep finding some Christian artefacts left by the previous owners and demonstrate completely different attitudes towards religious beliefs, their native culture and traditions.

Although the dichotomy between self and others is rather prominent in Sanjeev’s image, his wife demonstrates gradual shifting to transculturality. Twinkle possesses “chameleonic” ability to adapt. Her unwillingness to obey patriarchal rules, passion for Christian artefacts and respect for other religion are harmoniously combined with the faithfulness to her native Indian culture. The girl respects her parents and their will, she wears traditional clothes, learns to cook traditional dishes. She is able to live up to current moment without focusing on the otherness of American society and her personal distinctions. Twinkle acts as a “cultural broker” [23] mediating the relationship between the cultures encountering.

Intercultural relationship is the most vividly presented when it comes to the perception of cultural units. In the story “This Blessed House” they comprise culture-specific items, traditions, cultural values and artefacts. Their contextual setting contains characters’ attitudes, judgements and opinions expressing cultural, social and religious beliefs.

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