

RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM AND IDENTITY PERFORMANCE IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S "THIS BLESSED HOUSE"

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Abstract. This article examines Jhumpa Lahiri's short story "This Blessed House" through the lens of religious symbolism and identity performance within a diasporic context. The study focuses on how religious artifacts function as symbols of cultural intrusion, psychological projection, and identity instability. It argues that Lahiri presents identity not as a fixed essence but as a performative construct shaped by external environments and interpersonal dynamics. Through the contrasting characters of Twinkle and Sanjeev, the story reveals that cultural hybridity does not produce coherence but instead generates tension, misrecognition, and emotional disconnection. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity and Judith Butler's concept of performativity, this article demonstrates that identity in the diasporic space is continuously enacted, negotiated, and destabilized.

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri, hybridity, performativity, religion, diaspora, identity, symbolism

In diasporic literature, identity is often portrayed as a dynamic and unstable construct shaped by cultural displacement and interaction. Jhumpa Lahiri is particularly known for her ability to depict the subtle psychological tensions that arise within immigrant experiences. Her short story "This Blessed House" offers a nuanced exploration of identity through the interplay of religion, culture, and interpersonal relationships. Unlike narratives that focus on external struggles, Lahiri situates conflict within the domestic sphere, where identity is negotiated through everyday interactions. The story centers on a newly married couple, Twinkle and Sanjeev, whose differing responses to American culture create tension within their relationship. The discovery of Christian artifacts in their home becomes the central motif through which issues of identity and belonging are explored. This article argues that Lahiri uses religious symbolism to expose the performative nature of identity in a diasporic context. The characters' engagement with these symbols reveals not only their cultural positions but also their psychological insecurities. Through this lens, the story demonstrates that identity is not a stable or coherent entity but a continuous process of negotiation and performance.

The analysis of "This Blessed House" is grounded in two key theoretical perspectives: Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity and Judith Butler's theory of performativity. Bhabha's notion of hybridity describes the "third space" in which cultural identities are formed through interaction and negotiation rather than fixed origins. This space is characterized by ambiguity and instability, as individuals navigate multiple cultural influences. In Lahiri's story, both Twinkle and Sanjeev occupy this hybrid space, yet they respond to it in different ways. Judith Butler's concept of performativity further deepens this analysis by suggesting that identity is not something one possesses, but something one performs through repeated actions and behaviors. Identity is constructed through social practices and is therefore inherently unstable. By

combining these frameworks, this article demonstrates that the characters' identities are not fixed but continuously enacted and contested within the domestic space.

The Christian objects discovered in the house serve as the central symbolic element of the story. These artifacts are not merely decorative items; they represent the intrusion of an unfamiliar cultural and religious system into the characters' lives. For Twinkle, these objects are sources of fascination and amusement. She treats them as curiosities, incorporating them into her environment without questioning their meaning. Her behavior suggests an openness to cultural hybridity, as she does not perceive these symbols as threatening. In contrast, Sanjeev reacts with discomfort and resistance. He views the artifacts as inappropriate and intrusive, reflecting his desire to maintain clear cultural boundaries. His reaction reveals a deeper anxiety about identity, as the presence of these objects challenges his sense of cultural coherence. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the artifacts can be interpreted as projections of internal conflict. They externalize the tension between tradition and adaptation, making visible the psychological struggles experienced by the characters.

Twinkle's character embodies the concept of identity as performance. Her engagement with the Christian artifacts is not rooted in religious belief but in aesthetic and emotional response. She adopts elements of American culture in a spontaneous and unstructured manner, demonstrating a fluid approach to identity. However, this performativity also raises questions about authenticity. Twinkle's identity appears to be constructed through surface-level engagement rather than deep cultural understanding. This suggests that her hybridity is not entirely stable, but rather contingent and situational. Despite this, Twinkle's performative identity grants her a sense of freedom. She is not constrained by rigid cultural expectations, allowing her to navigate the hybrid space with relative ease. Her character challenges traditional notions of authenticity, suggesting that identity can be flexible and adaptive.

In contrast, Sanjeev represents an attempt to maintain a stable and coherent identity. He values order, rationality, and cultural consistency, seeking to define himself through clear boundaries. His discomfort with Twinkle's behavior reflects his fear of losing control over his identity. Sanjeev's identity can be understood as an illusion of stability. While he attempts to resist hybridity, he is nonetheless situated within the same cultural space as Twinkle. His resistance does not eliminate hybridity but instead intensifies his anxiety. From a psychological perspective, Sanjeev's behavior functions as a defense mechanism. By rejecting unfamiliar elements, he attempts to preserve a sense of self. However, this strategy ultimately isolates him, preventing meaningful engagement with both his environment and his partner.

The marriage between Twinkle and Sanjeev serves as the primary site where identity is negotiated and contested. Their relationship highlights the tension between different approaches to cultural adaptation. Twinkle's performative identity and Sanjeev's desire for stability create a fundamental incompatibility. Their inability to reconcile these differences leads to emotional disconnection, even in the absence of overt conflict. Lahiri portrays marriage not as a harmonious union, but as a space where cultural and psychological tensions are intensified. The domestic setting becomes a microcosm of the broader diasporic experience, reflecting the challenges of negotiating identity in a multicultural environment.

"This Blessed House" offers a complex exploration of identity, revealing it as a performative and unstable construct shaped by cultural interaction and psychological

factors. Through the use of religious symbolism, Jhumpa Lahiri demonstrates how identity is continuously negotiated within the diasporic space. The contrasting characters of Twinkle and Sanjeev illustrate that hybridity does not necessarily lead to harmony, but can instead produce tension and misrecognition. Their relationship underscores the difficulty of achieving emotional connection when individuals approach identity in fundamentally different ways. Ultimately, the story challenges essentialist notions of identity, suggesting that it is not a fixed essence but an ongoing process of performance and negotiation. Lahiri's nuanced portrayal highlights the complexity of diasporic experience, where belonging remains uncertain and continuously evolving.

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