



## Indian Knowledge Systems and Identity Crisis in Contemporary Society: A Study of Selected Works of Jhumpa Lahiri

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### Abstract

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) are deeply embedded in cultural practices such as family structures, traditions, language, and collective memory, all of which play a vital role in shaping individual identity. In contemporary society, forces such as globalization, migration, and Western modernity have significantly altered these systems, particularly for Indians living in diasporic contexts. This transformation often results in cultural alienation and identity crisis. Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction provides a powerful literary representation of this phenomenon by portraying characters who struggle to negotiate their Indian cultural inheritance within Western social frameworks. This paper examines how the weakening of Indian Knowledge Systems under changing contemporary conditions leads to identity crisis in selected works of Jhumpa Lahiri. It further explores how cultural memory, familial bonds, and acceptance of hybrid identity emerge as possible solutions. By combining the conceptual framework of Indian Knowledge Systems with close literary analysis of Lahiri's works, the study highlights the continuing relevance of Indian cultural knowledge in addressing identity conflicts in contemporary society.

### Introduction

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) represent a comprehensive framework of cultural, social, and philosophical values developed through centuries of lived experience. These systems include family structures, rituals, language, traditions, collective memory, and a strong sense of belonging. Indian identity, traditionally, is shaped through continuity, emotional bonding, and cultural inheritance. However, in contemporary society, rapid globalization, migration, and Western modernity have significantly transformed these knowledge systems, particularly for Indians living in diasporic contexts.

One of the major consequences of these changing conditions is the emergence of identity crisis. Individuals who are detached from their cultural roots often experience confusion, alienation, and emotional instability. Jhumpa Lahiri, a prominent Indian-American writer, captures this crisis with remarkable sensitivity. Her fiction focuses on Indian immigrants and their descendants who struggle to negotiate their inherited Indian identity within Western social frameworks.

This paper examines how the weakening of Indian Knowledge Systems under contemporary conditions leads to identity crisis in selected works of Jhumpa Lahiri. It further explores how cultural memory, family bonds, and the acceptance of hybrid identity emerge as possible solutions. By combining the conceptual framework of Indian Knowledge Systems with literary analysis, the study highlights the continuing relevance of Indian cultural knowledge in contemporary society.

### Indian Knowledge Systems and Cultural Identity

Indian Knowledge Systems emphasize collective identity over individualism. Family is the primary unit through which cultural values, language, rituals, and emotional ethics are transmitted. Identity, within this system, is not merely personal but social and cultural. Respect for elders, attachment to homeland, and continuity of tradition form the foundation of Indian selfhood.

In contrast, contemporary Western society promotes independence, personal choice, and cultural flexibility. Migration from India to Western countries often disrupts traditional cultural transmission. As Indian families adapt to new environments, everyday practices of Indian knowledge—such as language use, ritual observance, and community life—become diluted. This disruption creates a gap between inherited cultural identity and lived social reality, leading to identity conflict.

Jhumpa Lahiri's works are deeply embedded in this cultural tension. Her characters are often caught between Indian values received through family and Western norms encountered in society, making Indian Knowledge Systems central to understanding their identity struggles.

### Indian Knowledge Systems and Identity Crisis in Jhumpa Lahiri's Major Works

Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction provides a sustained exploration of identity crisis shaped by the erosion, transformation, and partial recovery of Indian Knowledge Systems in contemporary diasporic society. Her works portray how migration disrupts traditional cultural frameworks such as family bonds, linguistic continuity, ritual practices, and collective memory—key elements through which Indian identity is traditionally constructed. The identity crisis experienced by her characters is not sudden but gradual, emerging from everyday negotiations between inherited cultural knowledge and modern Western social norms.

The Namesake (2003)

\*The Namesake\* offers one of the most direct representations of identity crisis caused by cultural displacement. In Indian Knowledge Systems, naming holds symbolic, emotional, and cultural significance, often connecting an individual to ancestry, memory, and tradition. Gogol Ganguli's discomfort with his name reflects his rejection of this inherited cultural meaning.

His parents, Ashima and Ashoke, represent first-generation immigrants who consciously preserve Indian traditions—food habits, rituals, language, and family values—despite living in America. These practices function as carriers of Indian knowledge. Gogol, however, grows up within American social institutions and experiences embarrassment and confusion regarding his cultural background. His identity crisis intensifies as he attempts to detach himself from Indian cultural markers in order to assimilate into Western society.

The novel demonstrates how the weakening of Indian Knowledge Systems in the diasporic environment leads to psychological conflict. However, Lahiri also presents a solution: Gogol's gradual understanding of his father's attachment to his name symbolizes a reconnection with cultural memory. This acceptance does not indicate a return to tradition but an emotional reconciliation with inherited identity, suggesting hybridity as a sustainable solution. (Lahiri, \*The Namesake\*)

Interpreter of Maladies (1999)

In \*Interpreter of Maladies\*, Lahiri explores identity crisis through fragmented relationships and emotional silence. Indian Knowledge Systems traditionally emphasize collective life, emotional interdependence, and shared cultural understanding. Lahiri's characters, however, experience a breakdown of these values in contemporary diasporic contexts.

Many characters in the collection are physically connected but emotionally isolated, highlighting the loss of cultural cohesion. The inability to communicate personal pain mirrors their inability to interpret their cultural displacement. The title itself metaphorically represents the failure to translate emotional and cultural suffering into meaningful understanding.

The stories reveal how detachment from cultural roots creates a sense of incompleteness and alienation. Lahiri suggests that identity crisis is not always loud or dramatic; often it exists silently, embedded in daily interactions. The absence of strong Indian Knowledge Systems in these lives intensifies emotional isolation, making identity fragmented and unstable. (Lahiri, \*Interpreter of Maladies\*)

Unaccustomed Earth (2008)

\*Unaccustomed Earth\* deeply examines generational differences in cultural attachment. Parents attempt to retain Indian values, while children, shaped by Western upbringing, seek autonomy and independence. This generational gap reflects the transformation of Indian Knowledge Systems under contemporary conditions.

Indian culture traditionally emphasizes continuity, respect for elders, and collective responsibility. Lahiri shows how these values are challenged by modern lifestyles that prioritize personal freedom. The children's struggle to balance emotional inheritance with modern individuality leads to identity confusion.

However, Lahiri does not portray Indian traditions as restrictive. Instead, she suggests that identity can evolve through conscious cultural negotiation. Characters who acknowledge their roots without feeling burdened by them achieve emotional clarity. The collection highlights that Indian Knowledge Systems remain relevant when adapted thoughtfully rather than rigidly preserved. (Lahiri, \*Unaccustomed Earth\*)

The Lowland (2013)

In \*The Lowland\*, Lahiri extends the discussion of identity crisis beyond migration to include political history and collective memory. Indian Knowledge Systems emphasize historical continuity



and social responsibility. The novel shows how separation from homeland and unresolved political trauma disrupt personal identity.

The characters' emotional struggles reflect the long-term consequences of cultural and historical disconnection. Migration here is not merely geographical but psychological. The absence of rooted cultural frameworks intensifies loneliness and identity confusion, particularly for characters attempting to rebuild life in foreign spaces.

Through this novel, Lahiri suggests that identity is shaped not only by present conditions but also by inherited histories. The loss of cultural memory deepens identity crisis, while acknowledgment of the past enables partial healing. (Lahiri, \*The Lowland\*)

### Conclusion

The theme "Indian Knowledge and Contemporary Society: Changing Conditions, Problems and Solutions" is powerfully reflected in Jhumpa Lahiri's exploration of identity crisis. Her works illustrate how changing social conditions weaken Indian Knowledge Systems, leading to cultural alienation and psychological conflict. At the same time, they propose solutions through cultural memory, familial bonds, and hybrid identity.

By examining Lahiri's fiction through the lens of Indian Knowledge Systems, this paper highlights the enduring importance of cultural knowledge in shaping identity in contemporary society. The study affirms that while conditions change, Indian Knowledge Systems continue to offer meaningful ways to understand and resolve identity crisis in a globalized world.

### Works Cited

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