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Linguistic Transition and the Evolution of Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *In Other Words*

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between linguistic transition and identity formation in the memoir of Jhumpa Lahiri, *In Other Words* (2016). Lahiri's writing in Italian is a transformative process of self-reinvention and cultural negotiation, a renegotiation that embodies hybridity, liminality, and subalternity. Drawing on Gayatri Spivak's work on subaltern voices and the politics of representation, the research analyses how shifts in language affect identity among the marginalized. Homi Bhabha's theories of hybridity and the third space address the negotiation of cultural identities in a diasporic context. This offers a valuable glimpse of Lahiri's work as capturing the complexities of inhabiting multilingual and multicultural geographies as representative of a global contemporary identity. Findings indicate that linguistic transitions challenge traditional notions of cultural belonging, highlighting the fluid interplay between language and identity in a globalized world.



Keywords: Linguistic transition, Identity evolution, Hybridity, Subalternity, Third Space, Cultural negotiation

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri, a prominent author, examines identity, displacement, and the immigrant experience through her work. Born in London to Bengali Indian parents and raised in South Carolina, Lahiri's multicultural background strongly informs her narratives. The difficulties of individuals straddling dual identities in a globalized world are often embedded in her narratives, which brilliantly reflect the messiness of cultural hybridity. Outside of fiction, Lahiri's essays and memoirs delve deeper into her bilingual experiences and changing relationship with language and identity. Lahiri also published *In Other Words*, a memoir written in Italian, in 2016, a turning point in her career. This work tells the story of her process of learning and using a new language in order to communicate the experience with which she seems a stranger, the powerful nature of a linguistic transition. Embracing Italian, Lahiri reinvents herself and meditates on the fluidity of identity in a global society. In her case, language morphs into a potent vehicle for self-expression and cultural negotiation, a new index of belonging and identity. This study examines the interplay between language shift and identity construction in Lahiri's work, particularly as it pertains to her authorship as a bilingual writer. Based on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's and Homi Bhabha's theories, the study examines Lahiri's liminal position of negotiating multiple languages and cultures. The approach demonstrated by Lahiri of balancing collective representation with individual agency, through Spivak's concept of Strategic essentialism, shows how Lahiri manipulates her Bengali heritage in being able to accept her Italian identity (Spivak). Her characters are often inhabited at subaltern spaces, whose struggles for self-expression and belonging — an understanding enhanced by Spivak's subaltern theory.

The notions of 'hybridity' and the 'third space' given by Bhabha further illuminate Lahiri's exploration of identity (Bhabha). Lahiri embodies cultural hybridity, blending her Bengali roots with Italian influences to redefine identity beyond binary distinctions through her shift to Italian. Bhabha's Third Space allows for a potential site of intertextuality that resonates with the airing of multilayered identities that arise as a result of cross-cultural interactions (*The Location*). This Third Space comes alive in the language journey of Lahiri, her journey with language rejects the traditional constructs of culture and belonging and carves a space for a new narrative of self-discovery.

Literature Review

Several scholars have critically examined Lahiri's works focusing on themes of migration, identity, and linguistic transition. In *Portrayal of Exilic Experiences in Jhumpa Lahiri's In Other Words*, Deshmukh sees migration, voluntary, forcibly, and the sociopolitics of refugees and exiles. His poems explore diasporic consciousness, underlying nostalgia for one's native land and feelings of unrootedness in stranger soil. Lahiri's exploration of identity, alienation, and cultural hybridity has been highlighted in Verma's *Linguistic Pilgrimage: A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's In Other Words*. In her new book, Verma explores her life as a diasporic writer — the exile, the assimilation, the mixed feelings about her



native and adopted tongues. Linguistic transition and the way it transforms selfhood remains less explored in Verma's study. This paper fills that gap by analyzing the implications of Lahiri's decision to write in Italian and the new linguistic identity that it creates.

In *In Search of the Invisible Roots: Immigrant Experiences in Jhumpa Lahiri's Unaccustomed Earth*, Daniela Rogobete explores generational issues and cultural dislocation for immigrants during their lives. Exploring the ways in which diasporic people are connected to their place of origin, sometimes without realizing it, she reveals the tension between identities and belonging in a place that does not feel familiar to them. In her comparative study of Lahiri, Yoko Tawada, and Kazuo Ishiguro, Walkowitz considers how these authors strategically avoid a functional comprehension or command of the dominant, Anglo-American language. Although Walkowitz broadens the discussion on multilingualism and colonial languages cohabitations. Fabrizio De Donno, in *Translingual Affairs of World Literature: Rootlessness and Romance in Jhumpa Lahiri and Yoko Tawada*, draws parallels between Lahiri and Tawada, emphasizing their creative approaches to translingual and metaphorical linguistic family romance. De Donno identifies their experience of engagement in rootlessness and resemantization of their ties to their mother tongue. Amit Shankar Saha's paper, *The Indian Diaspora and Reading Desai, Mukherjee, Gupta, and Lahiri*, explores immigrants negotiating cultural negotiation, ethnic reassertion, and hybrid identity." Saha shows how displacement creates a double life that melds cultural legacy with new realities. Stoican's analysis connects Lahiri's autobiographical writing to modernist artistic influences, including Henri Matisse's visual motifs, establishing a link between her transcultural path and artistic self-definition. Stoican's work largely skirts the question of the linguistic dimension of Lahiri's transformation, which remains the focus of this paper. This paper fills in that blank, focusing on how the transition to Italian as a vehicle for speaking the self reconceptualizes Lahiri's identity. Language as a transformative medium in her self-Reinvention, challenging cultural hierarchies and fostering a nuanced understanding of identity within diasporic literature. By exploring the relationship between language, culture, and change, the study engages with present-day literary conversations about how identities are being formed in a globalized world.

Research Methodology

The current study makes an active analysis of Jhumpa Lahiri's *In Other Words*, employing qualitative, textual analysis. They dissect her narrative through close readings, examining her own transition between linguistics and how that played out in her growing, evolving self. Using theoretical lenses, such as Homi K. Bhabha's 'Third Space' and Gayatri Spivak's subalternity theory, they interpret Lahiri's experiences. The researcher also utilizes secondary sources, such as critical essays and scholarly articles, to contextualize Lahiri's work within broader discussions on translingual and diasporic literature.

Discussion

Lahiri's memoir, *In Other Words*, an English translation of her Italian memoir, *In Altre Parole*, is an account of her journey with the language and an entry into the life of Italian culture. The memoir is a close examination of identity, language, and belonging through the prism of her own experiences,



examining the inherent displacement and transformation of one culture to another and highlighting universal themes that resonate with all readers. It is a personal memoir embedded with a poignant meditation on identity premised upon both language and culture. Based on research, the author's journey provides insight into the complexity of cultural displacement and the continuously evolving nature of identity. Lahiri's decision to write only in Italian is a radical move of self-reconstruction, one that distance her from her Bengali heritage and English language experience. In "The Crossing," she expresses, "I want to cross a small lake. It really is small, and yet the other shore seems too far away, beyond my abilities. I'm aware that the lake is very deep in the middle, and even though I know how to swim" (3).

Lahiri views her engagement with Italian as a linguistic and existential experiment, a journey where she reimagines her sense of self. She reflects: "I think that my writing in Italian is a flight. Dissecting my linguistic metamorphosis, I realize that I'm trying to get away from something, to free myself. I've been writing in Italian for almost two years, and I feel that I've been transformed, almost reborn" (150). For her, writing in a foreign language becomes a way of reconfiguring herself, finding a way out of the binds in which her culture and language had settled around her. In her mirror, she desires to escape the confines of her past and enter a realm where her identity grows with a new language. In so doing, Lahiri negotiates her legacy and her reinvention:

I'm a writer: I identify myself completely with language, I work with it. And yet the wall keeps me at a distance, separates me. The wall is inevitable. It surrounds me wherever I go, so that I wonder if perhaps the wall is me. I write in order to break down the wall, to express myself in a pure way. When I write, my appearance, my name have nothing to do with it. I am heard without being seen, without prejudices, without a filter. I am invisible. I become my words, and the words become me. When I write in Italian I have to accept a second wall, which is very high and even more impermeable: the wall of language itself. But from the creative point of view that linguistic wall, however exasperating, interests me, inspires me (133).

The present research expresses the sense of alienation and unnaturalness the author feels when writing in Italian: "When I write in Italian, I feel like an intruder, an impostor. The work seems counterfeit, unnatural. I realize that I've crossed over a boundary, that I feel lost, in flight. I'm a complete foreigner" (81). The lines convey Lahiri's sense of linguistic exclusion and the struggles of finding herself in a language she had to learn, "afraid of being alone in the water, without any support" (3), as she navigates the depths of a new language. This metaphor of crossing a lake symbolises the emotional and intellectual journey Lahiri undertakes as she grapples with the difficulties of language learning. The lake, representing the distance between her present self and the new identity she seeks to adopt, captures the vulnerability and determination inherent in her journey. As Ms. Ekta Laddha writes in her paper: "When a tree is uprooted, it can't be replanted When a plant is sown anywhere, it will nurture depending on its requisite needs. Such is the comparison between an immigrant and the progeny of an immigrant" (405). It stresses her alienation in Italian's new world, as stubbornly determined that it may



be. One of the key motifs of Lahiri's struggle is self-translation, which shows her wrestling with the challenges of identity tampered by language. As Lahiri explains:

I translate myself, I feel like the mother of two children. I notice that I've changed my relation to the language, but maybe this change reflects a development, a natural journey. One type of love follows the other; from a passionate coupling, ideally, a new generation is born. I feel an emotion even more intense, more pure, more transcendent for my children. Maternity is a visceral bond, an unconditional love, a devotion that goes beyond attraction and compatibility (113-114).

For Lahiri, self-translation is an emotional reckoning: she must not only translate words but also experiences, ideas, even herself. In this endeavour, she grapples with the interplay between her Bengali identity, American upbringing, and the burgeoning Italian identity she finds herself embodying, and the outcome is a vibrant, hybrid sense of self. Lahiri speaks of self-translation in her experience, which resonates with Homi Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space," where transcultural and polylingual identities meet, thus giving rise to new modes of self-representation. She observes, "I think that translating is the most profound, most intimate way of reading. A translation is a wonderful, dynamic encounter between two languages, two texts, two writers. It entails a doubling, a renewal" (115). In this third space, Lahiri lets her contradictory selves be, which leads to a vision of self that is richer, more fluid. Such fluidity and dynamism of the 'Third Space' makes evident Homi Bhabha's notion *The Location of Culture*:

Being in the 'beyond', then, is to inhabit an intervening space, as any dictionary will tell you. But to dwell 'in the beyond' is also, as I have shown, to be part of a revisionary time, a return to the present to redescribe our human, historic commonality, to touch the future on its hither side. In that sense, then, the intervening space 'beyond', becomes a space of intervention in the here and now (7).

Lahiri reconciles her Bengali roots with her Italian experiences, crafting a transcultural voice that embodies identity as a fluid negotiation between cultures. Embracing exile willingly, she navigates the liminal space where belonging and alienation intersect, reflecting Bhabha's theory of hybrid identity.

Lahiri's transition aligns with Spivak's elucidation on the function of language in representation. Spivak argues that representation is not only a question of speaking for but also of 're-representing' and thus disturbing the balance of power. As Spivak states in her essay: "The shifting distinctions between representation within the state and political economy, on the one hand, and within the theory of the Subject, on the other, must not be obliterated" (275-276). Through the linguistic encounter in Italian as an adopted tongue in which she writes, Lahiri subverts the regular expectations of a Bengali-American author, and thus produces a new type 're-presentation' of her writing self. In this sense, it resonates strongly with Spivak's argument that the subaltern's act of speaking-ordering (284) to reach the agent is a form of resistance that, provided it 'disrupts the structures of dominance' (289), suggests that it is on the supplementary edge of the global space, confirming the notion of a passport more than ever. Lahiri's conscious decision to 'represent' herself in an alien linguistic terrain is an act of reclaiming



agency. Spivak writes, “The link to the workers’ struggle is located in the desire to blow up power at any point of its application” (272). Lahiri’s immersion in Italian reflects a deliberate rupture from her linguistic past, reshaping her relationship with power, belonging, and selfhood. Through linguistic reinvention, she confronts insecurity and alienation, illuminating the complexities of mastery and identity. As she writes:

You are without a voice, without power. No chink, no point of entrance can be found in the wall. I know that if I stayed in Italy for the rest of my life, even if I were able to speak a polished, impeccable Italian, that wall, for me, would remain. I think of people who were born and grew up in Italy, who consider Italy their homeland, who speak Italian perfectly, but who, in the eyes of certain Italians, seem “foreign.” (131)

Lahiri embraces linguistic inadequacy as both humility and freedom, finding creative energy in vulnerability. She discovers empowerment in limitation, transforming weakness into growth and forging a raw yet authentic voice, rejecting the pressure for mastery,

The immersion in Italian allows Lahiri to shed the burdens of past linguistic identities, stating, “By writing in Italian, I think I am escaping both my failures with regard to English and my success. Italian offers me a very different literary path” (151). Linguistic transition becomes a form of emancipation and a means of reconnection; she is able to move beyond past restrictions of identity and rebuild her wiring and home within a different socio-cultural and literary context. As she writes, “I think that my new language, more limited, more immature, gives me a more extensive, more adult gaze. That’s the reason I continue, for now, to write in Italian” (192-193). This is indicative of her understanding that language is foundational to self-making. And in adopting Italian, Lahiri makes space for a new identification, one derived from the mutable and transitive power of language. She argues, As Lahiri recounts, “It’s what my world is, and I’ve always been aware of my parents came from Calcutta. I have found myself sort of caught between the worlds of left behind and still clung to, and also the world that surrounded me at school and everywhere else, as soon as I set foot out of the door” (qtd. in Kaul, 81). Lahiri points out, through this statement that identity never ends, it is always negotiated, remade by the cultural and linguistic world we inhabit. Her cradling of Italian as a new piece of herself is a signature of change, of being a liquid state, of fumbles and grappling toward something authentic.

Lahiri presents linguistic transition as a fluid process of self-invention, as opposed to a fixed idea of identity; Her memoir, like the collection, emphasizes the way language creates belonging and embeds its subject’s understanding of herself, and also how identity remains fluid and responsive to experience. In an interconnected world, she celebrates language as not just a vehicle for communication, but a vessel for change, reflection, and redefinition. Lahiri’s exploration of linguistic transition and identity echoes Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan Quartet, which interrogates language, gender and personal history in Naples. Both authors emphasize the psychological and emotional difficulties of getting a new language and its impact on self. Mukherjee reflects on the immigrant experience, stating, “We immigrants have fascinating tales to relate ... when we uproot ourselves ... we suddenly must absorb 200 years of American history and learn to adapt” (qtd. in Toshimenla, 11). Like



Mukherjee and Ferrante, Lahiri emphasizes language's role in navigating displacement, adaptation, and identity formation.

Offering crucial insights into the translingual and multicultural world, the work transcends personal reflection. Her choice to write in Italian disrupts traditional notions of authorship and language, highlighting the fluidity of cultural identity. As Joydeep Bhattacharya observes, "It is a plural world where nothing remains singular or mono-dimensional. Multiculturalism replaces the sovereignty of any particular identity with multiplicity as different cultural voices gain space" (2). Her writing contributes to deprovincializing both Italian and Anglophone literary fields, engaging with themes of cultural dislocation and fragmented identities. This matches with Stuart Hall's assertion in his essay *Cultural identity and Diaspora* (1994) that "Cultural identity, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past... Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (225).

The work demonstrates how language facilitates the reimagining of selfhood and illuminates the complexities of diasporic experience, exemplifies the dynamic and evolving nature of identity. As Dr. Suman Bala notes, "Diaspora in the modern world may have different contexts...Cultural cross-currents have led to a hybrid culture and a new process of cultural assimilation...diasporic reciprocation has become one of the recurrent themes in post-colonial world literature" (qtd. in Toshimenla, 13-14). Lahiri's story projects the power of language on a global backdrop, expanding the limits of diasporic literature and occupying a space between exile and belonging. Bhabha's lines are important to note here, "The transnational dimension of cultural transformation -- migration, diaspora, displacement, relocation -- makes the process of cultural translation a complex form of signification" (qtd. in Haj, 32). welcoming Italian into her work, Lahiri reminds her audience to consider the mobility of identity, refracted through the prisms of language, culture, and her own lived life.

Conclusion

To sum up, Lahiri's *In Other Words* powerfully demonstrates how linguistic switch can change identity. Writing, for her, becomes not just a different language, but an act of profound self-transformation that reveals the inextricable relationship between language, culture and identity. Lahiri herself describes this shift as a 'rebirth,' a destruction and rebuilding of her sense of self, which speaks to the dual capacity of language to alienate and to incite intense self-exploration. Lahiri successfully undermines the supremacy of English, revealing her agency in a complex translingual environment, engaging with the concepts of Homi K. Bhabha's 'third space' and Gayatri Spivak's 'subalternity'. Not just a valuable exploration of Lahiri's personal journey, this study sets the stage for broader academic investigations into the implications of linguistic change for diasporic identity. Comparative studies on translingual authors from diverse cultural contexts can help shed more light on their shared interventions in global literary and identity frameworks, providing new critical lenses into the ways that language and personal histories intersect in complex and important ways.



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