



**JOURNAL OF INDIAN LANGUAGES
AND INDIAN LITERATURE IN ENGLISH**

Journal of Indian languages and Indian literature in English, 03(01), 168-177; 2025

**Interplay of Languages as a means of Identity Negotiation
and Cultural Exchange in the Select Works of Jhumpa
Lahiri**

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APACitation:

C. George Fernandes (2025). Interplay of Languages as a means of Identity Negotiation and Cultural Exchange in the Select Works of Jhumpa Lahiri , Journal of Indian Languages and Indian literature in English, 03(01), 168-177; 2025

Submission Date: 11.03.2025

Acceptance Date: 24.03.2025

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Abstract

One of the most remarkably complex processes in the diasporic narrative is interplay between native and migrant languages. This process of interaction shapes and constructs the characteristics of diaspora narrative not only in the language aspect

but also in terms of culture and identity. Languages play a crucial role in the lives of diaspora and contribute significantly in shaping the complex identity. As far as the language is concerned migrants often mix native language with the host language which results in hybrid linguistic form. One can find code-switching in their conversation as a result of bilingual identity. Jhumpa Lahiri's language is unique in this aspect. For instance, the novel *The Namesake* (2003) explores the interplay of language between Bengali and English. This paper examines how the interplay of languages leads to linguistic adaptation, identity negotiation and cultural exchange. The study also probes the general phenomena of the linguistic gap between two generations. Ashima's struggle with English when she first arrives in America contrasts with Gogol's rejection of Bengali. Ashima's emotional connection to Bengali literature contrasts with Gogol's preference for American Novels, which reinforces the cultural divide through language. Thus, the language interplay in the Indian diaspora is a prospective source for investigation. The native language also plays a crucial role in uniting different linguistic groups within the diaspora.

Keywords: Interplay, languages, identity negotiation and cultural exchange, code-switching, bilingual identity

1. Introduction

Language is a complex phenomenon as far as diaspora is concerned because it becomes the root cause for identity crisis. When two languages meet, it leads to the third space where confusion prevails in the socio-cultural aspect. Jhumpa Lahiri's works are deeply identified as the marker of identity with the themes of cultural displacement, alienation and linguistic negotiation. In her narratives, there remains a wide scope to explore diaspora complexity and to analyse how language shapes life of diaspora by self-perception and facilitates cultural attitude, especially in the lives of diasporic individuals who navigate between multiple linguistic and cultural spheres. In this way, Lahiri's characters encounter linguistic duality which reflects their cultural alienation, aspirations for assimilation and identity negotiation. This interplay of languages showcases how language mediates cross-cultural interactions.

2. Interplay of Language

In the context of migration and diaspora, the interplay of language is an unavoidable activity used by the immigrants in order to balance their lives in the unaccustomed earth.

Their dynamic engagement with two or more languages serve multiple purposes. It is an ongoing process of identity formation for the Indian immigrants. They don't leave their own languages, once absorbing the new language, as "the migrants maintain the language, customs, values, norms, tools, technologies, products, organizations and institutions of their homeland in the unaccustomed earth" (Mhalunkar 2). Though the dominant language plays its role primarily in the lives of the Indian migrants, the native language also equally goes along with it to its capacity.

Ashoke, the Indian immigrant, settled in America, normally speaks in Bengali wherever he goes with his family unless the situation compels them to go for another one. "At restaurants and bars, they sometimes slip Bengali phrases into their conversation in order to comment with impunity on another diner's unfortunate hair or shoes (*NS* 211). Thus, these Indian immigrants unavoidably use both their language and that of the host land.

Laxmi, from India, settles in America and shares her personal and family problems with Miranda, the American lady. In this dialogue, she maintains to speak in English to a certain extent but "her sentences peppered every now and then with an Indian Word" (*IM* 84). In this way, the immigrants' inability to fully express themselves, limits their social mobility and emotional connections in the settled country and so they try to learn the language of the host. At the same time, though they find ways to learn it, this learning is not perfect and so they depend on their own language also. Thus, the interplay of language serves as the inevitable part of the Indian immigrants' lives.

3. Language and Cultural Identity

Language mediates human relationships and learning a new language redefines personal and cultural identity, emphasizing that identity is fluid and shaped by linguistic choices. Migrant language becomes the focus in Bengali cultures and celebrations. The family of Ashoke and Ashima get ready for celebration, and "Ashima had typed up an explanation of Bengali wedding rituals on the computer and mailed it to all the Americans on the guest list" (*NS* 216). This typing is of course done in Bengali language and in this way, it plays its role in the cultural activities of the Indian immigrants. When they go to Calcutta from America, Ashima experiences the cultural identity when she hears her own language and wants to relate to them.

There are a few non-Indians and others are of Bengali community in the train and so “Bengali conversation fills the cabin” (NS 81) and hearing the Bengali words, Ashima “has already exchanged addresses with the family across the aisle” (NS 81).

On another occasion, the Indian immigrant, Mr. Nandi plays with baby Gogol. “Mr. Nandi leans over and calls the baby, “Buro” the Bengali word for “old man”” (NS 26) and Gogol “calls his mother “Ma,” his father “Baba”” (NS 40–41) and later, Ashima, while expecting her second child, tells Gogol, “There’ll be someone to call you Dada” (NS 54). After Gogol and Maxine have lunch and evening tea with Gogol’s parents, they move to Cleveland. Even in the presence of Maxine, Ashima uses the Bengali words and says, “Call to let us know you’ve arrived there safely” (NS 150). All Ashoke, Ashima, Gogol and Sonia, in India, in the summer, visit Delhi and then Agra and Ashima and Ashoke speak “in broken Hindi” (Yadav 390) in order to show their cultural ties with their own language. In this way, the Bengalis apply their own language to their cultural identity in all the possible ways.

4. Code Switching

The code-switching connotes the dual cultural identity and the constant negotiation between assimilation and cultural retention. Here, the immigrants start with the host land and being unable to continue with this language, they shift to their own language. It happens in both ways; that is from the language of hostland to the native language and vice versa.

Ruma, in “Unaccustomed Earth” is not fluent in her own language and so switches to the language of the hostland since she is of the second generation Indian immigrant and is well versed in English, the language of the hostland.. “Bengali had never been a language in which she felt like an adult. Her own Bengali was slipping from her” (UE 12). When she speaks Bengali, she is under domination of English and unintentionally, drops her own language.

In the short story, “Nobody’s Business”, Sang is the Indian immigrant who shares her house with other American men, though she is in love with Farouk, the American. “She spoke Bengali infrequently (UE 191)” even to her parents because the language of the host language dominates her native language. Though she is very particular about continuing to speak in English, especially for the sake of the English speaking people, she is unable to do it due to her code switching.

5. Language intimacy and emotions

Normally, language of the same group fosters a sense of closeness and trust among them. It is not exceptional in the lives of the Indian immigrants also. It helps the immigrants to communicate not just words or facts but emotions, cultural references, and personal experiences of their lives. It still reflects nuances of love, concern, familiarity, and understanding among them. So, language is central to intimacy in their lives. Even the nonverbal communication like tone, body language, and even silence expresses the sense of closeness. Such features of language creates a sense of safety, comfort, and emotional connection amidst the Indian immigrants. Gogol, in *The Namesake*, “is asked to sit in front of a picture of his father, as a priest chants verses in Sanskrit” (181). When Sanskrit is chanted, the whole community becomes one with this language. Even on foreign soil, they keep up the Indian language and show their intimacy with it. Also, there is, in the lives of the Indian immigrants, “the use of Bengali literature magazines to remember Bengali ‘men, milieu and moment’,” (SK Das 8) and to show their language intimacy and ‘Indian Sensibility’. Language creates emotion in the lives of the immigrants since they are out of its reach. Still, it creates emotion in events such as death and its related religious practices. . Due to such an intimacy, Lahiri “tries to internationalise the Bengali diasporic sensibilities/culture through her text, particularly for Anglophone World” (SK Das 8). Migrant Language at Home is maintained systematically and interestingly. Ruma’s mother, in “Unaccustomed Earth”, plays her vital role in safeguarding her mother tongue by teaching the next generation. She has been “the helpful one, taking over the kitchen, singing songs to Akash and teaching him Bengali nursery rhymes” (UE 6). Moreover, she “had been strict, so much so that Ruma had never spoken to her in English” (UE 12).

6. Language and alienation

When there is a severe threat to the shared language, it often leads to alienation. When the Indian immigrants don’t find any atmosphere to speak their own language, they surely feel excluded, disconnected, misunderstood or alienated. Even when there is a difference in speaking the same language, articulating the regional accents, or vocabulary and in connoting the words, it leads to a sense of distance. Since the immigrants are unable to express themselves in the language of the dominant group, they have the feelings of isolation or marginalization. There is also the issue of miscommunication faced by the immigrants due to the use of the

foreign language and it creates misunderstandings or misinterpretations among the immigrants. Such a language alienation reflects the cultural alienation in the lives of the immigrant communities, leading to the different ways of thinking, traditions, or values among them and it also causes the struggle for the Indian immigrants to reconcile their native language and culture with the language and culture of their new home.

“Positivistic activities such as efforts to cultivate and maintain heritage languages can be indicators of language – based practice communities (cf. Matras et al. Goldstein, P., & Matras, Y. 1143). In this way, the Indian immigrants try their best to maintain their native language even in the unaccustomed soil. The example, cited here, is the story of “Hell- Heaven” in which Pranab Kaku “taught Deborah to say khubbhalo and aacha” (*UE* 68), the Hindi words which reflect ‘Indian sensibility’ in America. “The writer who is out - of- country and even out-of- language may experience this loss in an intensified form” (Rushdie 12).

7. Linguistic Imperialism (Language hierarchies)

Linguistic Imperialism implies the dominance of one language over others, amounting to the suppression of minority languages. Normally, the local languages are considered to be more prestigious, powerful, or influential than others, and so there is, automatically, a hierarchy where some languages take upper hand, while others are endangered. Linguistic imperialism normally connects to political, economic, and cultural imperialism, and here, the native tongue of the immigrants is marginalized.

Though Ruma in the short story “Unaccustomed Earth” teaches her son Akash her own language, the native language, with its superiority, suppresses it. Lahiri writes, “By now Akash had forgotten the little Bengali Ruma had taught him when he was little” (*UE* 12) because the language of the hostland has control over the language of the homeland.

Colonialism is one of the most prominent causes of linguistic imperialism during colonial expansion. Languages like English, Spanish, French, and Portuguese become dominant in America, Africa, and Asia, and these languages displace other indigenous languages. This dominant character still continues in the host lands and so, the languages of immigrants lose their dynamism.

In the short story, “Interpreter of Maladies”, the children of Mr. Das and Mrs. Mina are fluent in English and “their accents sounded just like the ones Mr. Kapasi heard on American television programs, though not like the ones on *Dallas*” (IM 49).

There is also the impact of linguistic imperialism in the culture to which the particular language belongs. The culture, traditions, and worldviews associated with the minority languages are lost when a dominant language shows superiority. As language is deeply tied to identity and cultural heritage, there is always the extinction of culture also since the minority language is affected severely by the dominant language. People, speaking a minority language, face a lot of challenges in education if the curriculum is taught in a dominant language and because of this there is a lower literacy rate among them. There is also an issue of social inequality when there is a division between the dominant culture and the native culture of the Indian immigrants. Speakers of dominant languages become financially well, politically sound, and socially popular. At the same time, the speakers of minority languages suffer from discrimination and limited opportunities. There are also educational drawbacks due to the atmosphere of imperialism of languages. There is no greater academic success among speakers of minority languages compared to that of speakers of dominant languages. The issue of social inequality arises out of this hierarchical atmosphere. Lacking the knowledge and capability in the dominant language, the speakers of the minority language do not enjoy the better positions in the society. In the short story, Mrs. Sen, the main character Mrs. Sen sticks to speaking in the language of the host land where she has been controlled in using her own language and so she advises Eliot, for whom she serves as the babysitter, to “Speak English?” (IM 133). Also, both Mr. Sen and Mrs. Eliot have decided always to speak “to each other in English when Eliot was present” (IM 126).

Due to the control over the immigrant languages, the native language suppresses the immigrant languages and so, the second generation children are not able to be accustomed to the language of their motherland. Gogol too is not exceptional in this situation. “Lately he’s been lazy, addressing his parents in English though they continue to speak to him in Bengali” (NS 75). Ruma, in the short story, “Unaccustomed Earth” teaches her son Akash Bengali language to her full capacity. “After he started speaking in full sentences English had taken over, and she lacked the discipline to stick to Bengali” (UE 12).

The narrator, Usha describes the introduction part of the story, “Hell – Heaven” in which Pranab Kaku and her mother get to know each other. “He tapped my mother on

the shoulder and inquired, in English, if she might be a Bengali” (*UE* 61). Though Pranab Kaku guesses that Usha’s mother may be the Bengali woman, he chooses English language to enquire about her due to its dominating character. In the short story, “Year’s End,” the narrator Kaushik, who doesn’t like the presence of his step mother, Chitra and her two daughters, mentions about the public behaviour of his step sisters here. “They spoke to me in English, their accents and their intonation sounding as severe as mine must have sounded to your fully American car when we arrived as refugees in your family’s home” (*UE* 263). Language imperialism is found in the character of Sudha, in the short story, “Only Goodness.” She has “her perfect English, who called the repair department at Lechmere to have their appliances serviced” (*UE* 139). At the time of bride viewing, the family members of Ashoke “inquired after her studies and she was asked to recite a few stanzas from “The Daffodils” (*NS* 9). Normally, Ashoke’s family goes to India for any celebration or an important family event and Gogol has the habit of speaking in American English. “On trips to India his American – accented English is a source of endless amusement to his relatives” (*NS* 118). Moreover, “when young boys approach to sell postcards or marble trinkets Gogol and Sonia are forced to say, “English, please” (*NS* 84). In a way, the language of host land has kept the Indian immigrants under its control. They are highly forced to maintain the language of host land in all situations. Though the immigrants pay a visit to India for holidays or other special occasions, they are under the control of the language of the host land. Ashoke, Ashima, Gogol and Sonia go to India and visit the Taj Mahal. Gogol and Sonia are proud of this monument, “they could not connect beyond Bengali culture due to such facts as they were Bengali speaking and could not connect with the locals who spoke Hindi” (Yadav 390) which is inferior in status to English for the second generation immigrants.

8. Hybridization

According to Bhabha, in *Location of Culture*, his everyday life “was lived in that rich cultural mix of languages and lifestyles” (x). Hybridization in Language refers to the blending of languages, representing new forms of expression and this technique is often found in multilingual societies. Here, linguistic borrowing and following takes place and so new ideas, structure and even meaning are found in this atmosphere. This blending process creates dual linguistic identities, where, especially the immigrants maintain multiple languages and cultural identities simultaneously. Here, the person’s identity is moulded by all these languages and the associated cultures. Ashoke says. “My son is perfectly bilingual” (*NS* 58).

9. Identity negotiation and cultural exchange

Identity negotiation and cultural exchange express the complexities of the personal, social, and cultural identities of the immigrants in the context of the communication with people from different cultural backgrounds. In this process, the immigrants define, express, and reshape their identities based on their involvement and interactions with the people of the host land. Normally people often show their identity through the lens of their culture of values, traditions, language, and societal norms. Still, they constantly negotiate their identities in response to social expectations and relationships with others. Dominant groups impose certain regulations so that the immigrants can easily negotiate their identities. The people's identities are often shaped by a variety of factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, and political role. Identity negotiation can occur in both conscious and unconscious ways. For example, when people from different cultural backgrounds meet, they might adjust their behavior, language, or customs to fit in or be accepted, consciously or subconsciously adapting their identities in response to the new environment.

Cultural exchange is the platform through which different cultural groups of people share and experience each other's traditions, customs, values, and practices in the levels of travel, media, education, or even in everyday interactions and it fosters understanding and cooperation between different cultural groups. In this process they share their Knowledge and exchange information about art, food, language, religion, history, and other cultural elements. It develops the appreciation of differences, understanding

alternative ways of life, and respecting other cultures. There is also a vast opportunity of making the ideas, innovations, and practices spread across borders. Cultural elements often blend, creating new hybrid forms of art, food, or technology. For example, fusion cuisine combines culinary traditions from different countries. The "These diaspora languages are used to foster solidarity and notions of a common identity among the members of the community" (Adachi, Abstract).

10. Conclusion

The interplay of language basically creates an impact upon the Indian immigrants, having the pressure to assimilate into the dominant culture and automatically, adapt certain practices from the local culture into their own lives,

reshaping their identity in the process. The main identity is scattered due to the development of hybrid identities. When the Indian immigrants incorporate the elements from multiple cultures into their lives, they construct a new, multifaceted sense of new self.

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