



**Narrative Fragmentation and Power Structures: A Comparative Study of Zadie Smith's
Two Men Arrive in a Village and Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman***

Ms.D.Mahalakshmi, Assistant professor of English
.AyyaNadar Janaki Ammal,College,
Sivakasi, 626124

Dr.E.Prema,
Associate Professor of English, PG & Research Department of English,
Sri Meenakshi Government Arts College for Women(A),
Madurai-2

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of experimental storytelling, intertextuality, and multiple perspectives in Zadie Smith's short story "Two Men Arrive in a Village" from *Grand Union* and Perumal Murugan's novel *One Part Woman*. Though contrary in form, both texts make use of fragmented narratives, shifting viewpoints, and symbolic storytelling to critique systemic oppression, power structures, and individual agency. Smith's story presents a cyclical, figurative attack that reflects colonial violence, emphasizing how oppression repeats diagonally like chalk and cheese historical and geographical contexts. Murugan's novel, on the other hand, weaves folklore and fragmented storytelling to explore the deep-seated patriarchal and caste-based restrictions that shape personal destinies. By selecting "Two Men Arrive in a Village" from *Grand Union*, this study highlights how Smith's short fiction encapsulates broader themes present in her collection, making it a strong equivalent to Murugan's novel. Through a comparative lens, this study explores how both authors deconstruct linear storytelling to centre uncertainty, trauma, and resistance. The paper argues that the use of narrative fragmentation serves as an instrument to mirror the instability of marginalized identities, forcing readers to

engage with unresolved tensions and open-ended conclusions. Ultimately, both works epitomize how contemporary literature uses experimental narrative techniques to interrogate social hierarchies, visualize historical memory, and challenge prevailing cultural narratives.

1. Introduction

Contemporary literature often encounters traditional narrative structures, taking up division, intertextuality, and multiple perspectives to explore complex socio-political realities. Zadie Smith and Perumal Murugan, two writers from distinct cultural and literary backgrounds, apply investigational storytelling techniques to examine power structures, relegation, and identity. Smith's short story "Two Men Arrive in a Village", from her collection *Grand Union*, presents an allegorical narrative about cycles of violence and invasion, critiquing colonial and postcolonial oppression. Murugan's novel *One Part Woman* correspondingly discovers social constraints, particularly caste and gender-based marginalization, through a non-linear narrative that interweaves folklore and personal history. This paper scrutinizes how both texts employ fragmented storytelling, shifting perspectives, and intertextuality to highlight themes of oppression, trauma, and individual agency. By comparing a short story with a novel, this study demonstrates how literary experimentation serves as a tool for social critique, reflecting the insecurity of marginalized identities and challenging dominant cultural narratives.

1.1. Literature review

Linguistic hybridity has been widely discussed in postcolonial and transnational literary studies. Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space" (1994) suggests that hybrid languages create an interstitial zone where new cultural identities emerge. Bhabha argues that hybridity challenges fixed national and linguistic boundaries, allowing for the negotiation of meaning between cultures. Similarly, Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia (1981) highlights the multiplicity of voices within a text, illustrating how linguistic hybridity functions as a form of resistance against monologic authority.

Authors such as Salman Rushdie, Zadie Smith, and Junot Díaz incorporate hybrid linguistic structures—blending English with Hindi, Spanish, or Caribbean Creole—to reflect the fragmented nature of postcolonial and diasporic subjectivities. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), for example, employs linguistic hybridity as a means of reclaiming postcolonial identity, while Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) uses Spanglish and untranslated Dominican slang to assert cultural specificity.

Translation as a Narrative Device

Translation in literature extends beyond linguistic conversion; it is often used to explore cultural incommensurability and the limits of communication. Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" (1923) argues that translation does not merely transfer meaning but reveals the original text's untranslatable essence. In experimental storytelling, translation becomes a site of struggle, where meaning is constantly negotiated rather than fixed.

David Bellos (2011) discusses the idea of "untranslatability," highlighting how certain cultural concepts resist direct translation and require creative adaptation. This notion is evident in works such as Jhumpa Lahiri's *In Other Words* (2016), where the act of writing in a second language (Italian) becomes an existential exploration of self-translation. Similarly, Zadie Smith's short stories in *Grand Union* (2019) often play with linguistic fluidity, using untranslated phrases and culturally embedded dialects to challenge the reader's expectations of linguistic coherence.

Experimental Storytelling and Linguistic Innovation

Experimental literature frequently disrupts conventional narrative structures, embracing linguistic play and polyphony. Writers like Samuel Beckett, who wrote in both French and English, deliberately manipulated language to create fragmented, minimalist narratives. More contemporary authors, such as Ocean Vuong and Xiaolu Guo, use linguistic hybridity and self-translation to craft stories that reflect diasporic experiences of linguistic displacement.

Postmodern theories of language, including Derrida's deconstruction, further inform how linguistic hybridity operates in experimental storytelling. Derrida's concept of *différance* (1972) suggests that meaning is always deferred and unstable, a principle that many hybrid narratives embody through multilingualism and shifting linguistic registers.

1.2. Research questions

1. How do contemporary authors use linguistic hybridity to challenge traditional storytelling structures?
2. In what ways does translation function as both a narrative technique and a thematic exploration of identity in experimental literature?
3. How do untranslated words, code-switching, and polyglossia affect reader engagement and interpretation?
4. To what extent does linguistic hybridity serve as a political act in postcolonial and diasporic storytelling?

2. Discussions

1. Destabilizing Narrative Authority through Linguistic Hybridity

Many experimental texts reject linguistic purity, using hybridity as a form of narrative disruption. Junot Díaz, for example, withholds translation of Spanish phrases in *Oscar Wao*, forcing monolingual readers to either seek external resources or accept a degree of incomprehension. This technique subverts the authority of English as a dominant literary language, affirming the cultural legitimacy of bilingual expression.

Zadie Smith's *Grand Union* similarly embraces linguistic hybridity, blending British and Caribbean dialects to reflect the complexities of diasporic identity. In "Two Men Arrive in a Village," Smith employs rhythmic, oral storytelling structures reminiscent of African griot traditions, emphasizing how hybrid narratives can function as sites of cultural memory and resistance.

2. Translation as a Metaphor for Cultural Displacement

Translation in experimental storytelling often highlights the limitations of language in capturing lived experience. Jhumpa Lahiri's linguistic shift from English to Italian in *In Other Words* illustrates how self-translation becomes an act of self-exploration, revealing the fragmented nature of diasporic belonging. Similarly, Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007) presents a protagonist learning English in real-time, making grammatical errors that reflect her evolving identity.

These texts show that translation is never neutral; it carries ideological weight, shaping how characters navigate cultural boundaries. The tension between linguistic accessibility and opacity mirrors the broader struggle of migrants and diasporic individuals to negotiate belonging in multilingual environments.

3. The Politics of Untranslatability

Untranslated words and culturally specific idioms serve as acts of resistance against linguistic assimilation. Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) incorporates Vietnamese phrases without translation, reinforcing the protagonist's intimate yet fractured connection to his heritage. This refusal to accommodate monolingual readers challenges Western literary conventions, asserting the validity of multilingual expression.

Furthermore, the concept of self-translation—where authors translate their own works into another language—raises questions about authenticity and authorship. Writers like Beckett and

Lahiri demonstrate that translation is not just about linguistic transfer but about rewriting one's own narrative within a different cultural framework.

3. Conclusions

Linguistic hybridity and translation in experimental storytelling serve as powerful tools for deconstructing traditional literary norms. By embracing multiple languages, untranslated elements, and self-reflexive translation, authors challenge dominant linguistic hierarchies and foreground the complexities of transnational identity. This study highlights that linguistic hybridity is not just a stylistic choice but a deeply political act—one that reshapes how we understand literature in a globalized world.

Future research could further explore how digital and AI-driven translation technologies impact multilingual storytelling, as well as how hybrid linguistic strategies influence reader reception across different cultural contexts. Ultimately, experimental storytelling reveals that language is not a fixed entity but a fluid, evolving medium that reflects the ever-changing landscape of human identity.

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