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## Echoes of Muted Tongues- Reforming Identities through Language

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### **Abstract:**

This dissertation examines the linguistic journeys of Yiyun Li, Eva Hoffman, and Jhumpa Lahiri, attempting to see how language serves as a space for individual cultural reinvention and displacement within diasporic narratives. Each author's transition to a non-native language reflects a broader negotiation of identity, belonging, and memory, revealing the emotional and intellectual complexities of linguistic shifts. Yiyun Li rejects Chinese as a language of ideological control, embracing English as a means of artistic and emotional liberation. Eva Hoffman, in *Lost in Translation*, portrays the painful rupture between Polish and English, highlighting the alienation and hybridity that emerge from linguistic and cultural displacement. Jhumpa Lahiri, in *In Other Words*, dissatisfied with both Bengali and English, turns to Italian to redefine her creative and personal identity, illustrating language as a tool of self-reinvention.

The study is framed through theoretical perspectives such as Stuart Hall's notion of identity as fluid and evolving, Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, and Frantz Fanon's analysis of language and self-perception. Additionally, William Labov's sociolinguistic theories and Michael Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) inform the discussion of language as both a

social and cognitive construct. This dissertation argues that language in diasporic contexts is not merely a means of communication but a profound transformation marker, serving as both a bridge and a barrier between past and present selves. Through comparative analysis, it highlights how linguistic transitions reflect broader struggles with assimilation, alienation, and cultural preservation.

**Keywords: Diaspora, language and identity, linguistic hybridity, self-reinvention, cultural displacement, Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, bilingualism, multilingualism, memory and language.**

Language is more than a simple tool for communication; it is an integral aspect of one's identity, shaping not only individual expression but cultural belonging. People are born with a language that places them in a social and historical framework, which shapes their worldview, cognitive growth, and emotional landscapes. A person's mother tongue, an intimate linguistic space that bears the burden of individual and societal memory, is frequently seen as the most natural means of self-expression. At the same time, this relationship becomes much more complicated for a language-switching individual such as a bilingual, immigrant, or exiled person. Language becomes more than solid ground; it instead becomes conflict, nostalgia, or reinvention. The relationship between one's adopted and native tongue raises deeper concerns of authenticity, selfhood, and belonging.

Being multilingual is frequently idealized as a cognitive and cultural benefit that provides access to various viewpoints and thought processes. However, herein also lies the cost of emotional reality; it can bring about fragmentation and, along with it, the feeling of never really belonging to either language context that one tends to move back and forth. Bilinguals often feel caught between

two emotional worlds since each language has unique cultural and psychological meanings which becomes increasingly more apparent when someone becomes estranged from their mother tongue, whether due to necessity, pain, or choice. Others do so as a result of cultural integration or forced migration, while others intentionally forsake their original language in an attempt to forge a new identity. Language becomes more than just a means of communication in these circumstances; it becomes a challenge that forms and changes the person.

### **Literature Review:**

Language is a central figure in understanding the diasporic experiences of people, whether the experience is of voluntary adoption of a new language or the forced necessity of learning one in a foreign context. Writers who have experienced linguistic migration often in their works explore the themes of the intersection of language, identity, and personal reinvention. Yiyun Li's essay *To Speak is to Blunder*, Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, and Jhumpa Lahiri's *In Other Words* shed light on the psychological and emotional aspects of the author's own experience with linguistic migration and transformation from one language to another. By delving into these texts, we see how language functions not just as a means of communication but as a space for identity negotiation, emotional reinvention, and cultural hybridity.

Yiyun Li's essay *To Speak is to Blunder* is the author's deeply personal exploration of her decision to abandon the use of her native tongue, Chinese, in her writings and adopt English, signifying both her break from her past and her journey towards self-reinvention. Her refusal to continue writing in Chinese- her first language- was not merely a practical choice, but also an emotional reaction to her complex relationship with her heritage. To Li, Chinese is a language burdened by familial expectations and further weighed down by cultural memories, responsibilities, and

identity. In her essay, Li explains that while Chinese is deeply intertwined with her own and her familial history making it fraught with emotional weight, English is a space of emotional neutrality for her. By stepping away from her native language, she chooses to distance herself from the emotional baggage of her past, which in turn allows her to craft a new narrative free from the constraints of familial and cultural expectations.

Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* is likewise concerned with the psychological trauma of linguistic migration. In this autobiography, Hoffman describes her life after her departure from Poland to Canada and, finally, the United States, where she faced the acculturation of the Polish language into English. For Hoffman, language is far more than a communication tool; it stands for a deeper attachment to her own history and cultural identity. She speaks of the trauma involved in losing the deep intimacy of her mother tongue: "I was losing the language of my childhood, the language of my heart" (Hoffman, 1989). An emotional alienation—this loss of words is not merely a loss of words but cuts in her identity and sense of belonging.

Jhumpa Lahiri's memoir *In Other Words* reflects on the author's relationship with language, identity, and belongingness, with particular emphasis on her decision to write in Italian. The author's immigrant status as a Bengali-American has always conditioned her work; in *In Other Words*, she examines her journey of linguistic reinvention. Born in London to Bengali parents and raised in the United States, Lahiri has always straddled different cultural identities. Writing in English came naturally to her, but she increasingly felt the need for a more authentic and visceral connection to Italian, a language she chose to learn as an adult. For Lahiri, writing in Italian, a tongue she deemed foreign yet meaningful, was a way to harness her movement beyond English's comforts and to challenge herself to convey her thoughts and feelings in a new tongue.

### **Theoretical Framework:**

In understanding the deep connection between language and identity, it is important to consider William Labov's pioneering work in sociolinguistics. An American linguist, Labov described language as the mirror that society has constructed of itself. He demonstrated that language does not simply constitute rules, but also comprises hierarchies within society through his works. *The Social Stratification of English in New York City* is one of Labov's studies in which he demonstrated how linguistic variation corresponds to different factors such as class, ethnicity, and geography. For instance, Labov found out that the pronunciation of the post-vocalic "r" in New York speech is statistically associated with higher social status. Use of such speech was a prestige-influenced form of English spoken more frequently by speakers from the upper classes, while lower-class speakers who never pronounced that sound were tagged as different linguistically thereby reinforcing the divide among them.

It is thus a social marker, and identity is most clearly reflected in its articulation in multilingual, multicultural settings. While shaping language, society also gets shaped by it, which brings about mobility within the society itself and causes individuals behaving with other members of the society to develop codes of conduct. One of which would be, style-shifting and code-switching for everyday lives wherein an individual engages through adopting a formal voice while in professional settings and speaking informally with friends; thus, this highlights changes that come with the fluidity of one's identity linguistically.

Building on this, British linguist Michael Halliday's concept of Systemic Functional Linguistics offers an expanded view of language's role. Halliday proposed that there are three main functions that language serves: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The ideational function permits human

beings to represent their experience and furnish ideas about the world; the interpersonal function considers the deployment of language while establishing relations and negotiating power; and the textual function organizes and structures discourse for coherence. All these functions together indicate that language is not merely a passive vehicle for communication but an active agent in social construction.

Here Halliday's approach finds itself almost congruent to the work of Labov on the active role of language in shaping one's identity. Language does not reflect who we are; it is a means by which we express and negotiate that sense of self. This is an especially important consideration to those in multilingual societies, in which language is constitutive of essential markers of cultural and social identity.

Bhabha's concept of hybridity helps to understand this dynamic. Hybridity, for Bhabha, describes how individuals in multicultural and multilingual contexts blend elements from different cultures and languages to form new, fluid identities. This process challenges the idea of fixed identities and instead emphasizes the adaptability and complexity of identity in the diaspora. In such settings, individuals often navigate between their mother tongues and the language of the host culture, creating a hybrid linguistic identity.

For diasporic authors, language is not only a medium of communication but also a place where all sorts of personal and cultural conflicts unfold. Many diasporic writers do not write in their mother tongues despite being very closely tied to these languages due to their histories. They most likely end up writing in another language, the dominant one of the adopted homeland, which often happens to be English as well. This choice is both a necessity and a form of creative resistance. It allows them to access wider audiences and engage in the literary world, but it also often leads to

linguistic alienation and the need to negotiate their identities within a language that is not their own.

This tension is captured in the work of postcolonial writers, who wrestle with the legacies of colonialism. As Frantz Fanon argues in *Black Skin, White Masks*, language can be a source of alienation for those who are forced to adopt the language of the colonizer. For many diasporic writers, such alienation becomes not merely a form of personal suffering but even a reclamation of power: by appropriating the language imposed upon them by the colonizing powers and infusing it with elements derived from their own cultures, they defy the hierarchical language systems imposed by the colonial powers.

### ***A Language of My Own: Yiyun Li's Struggle with Chinese and Embrace of English***

Born in 1972 in Beijing, Yiyun Li grew up surrounded by the echoes of China's Cultural Revolution. Her early years were spent in a time when language was not merely a means of communication but a tool of ideological control, which influenced her larger decision to embrace English and leave behind Chinese as a medium of creative expression. Yiyun Li's journey with language was not just a matter of linguistic preference but an intense emotional and creative negotiation between the language of her past (Chinese) and the language of her present and future (English). Her decision to write exclusively in English, a language she adopted later in life, represents a profound shift in her identity and artistic vision, one that is both liberating and alienating.

As a child, Yiyun Li was a prodigy in her Chinese. Essays she wrote at school were adopted as standards and praised for their eloquence and precision. This talent was maintained during the year of compulsory military service with the People's Liberation Army; her squad leader often got her



to write speeches. Writing, even then, was a refuge for her, a task she chose over the menial alternatives of cleaning toilets or tending to pigsties. She was incredibly gifted with language, but at the same time, this very proficiency sowed the seed of her discomfort with Chinese. She recalls participating in an oratory contest during high school, where her performance moved the audience—and herself—to tears. She realized, however, that the tears were brought forth not by genuine emotion but by the "poetic and insincere lies" she had crafted. This unsettling moment led her to question whether she could ever use Chinese to articulate authentic thoughts and feelings. This public language shaped by years of propaganda and conformity seemed incapable of capturing the nuances of her personal truth. Added to this was the fact that her intelligence and creativity appeared wholly tied to this public language, one that would never fully belong to her alone.

In 1996, Li came to the United States to obtain a graduate degree in immunology from the University of Iowa. This proved a turning point in both her career and her relationship with language. While her initial focus was on science, at some point, she started attending creative writing workshops where she rekindled her romance with storytelling. Her mentors later encouraged her to write fiction in English. This was not just a very practical choice; it was also a deep act of reinventing oneself. Writing in English allowed her to distance herself from the emotional and cultural burdens she associated with Chinese.

One of the most poignant assertions made by Li was in her essay *To Speak is to Blunder*, published in 2016 in the New York Times- "*It is hard to feel in an adopted language, yet it is impossible in my native language.*" (Li, 2016)

For Li, the act of abandoning Chinese was rooted in her disillusionment with the language's capacity to convey authentic emotion. In her work, she reflects on how her early proficiency in Chinese, celebrated by teachers and peers, became a source of discomfort. The public language of Chinese, especially in the context of her upbringing during the post-Cultural Revolution era, was imbued with collective narratives, propaganda, and social expectations. It was a language steeped in conformity, where individual expression was often suppressed in favor of communal ideals. This realization created a rift between her inner world and the language she was expected to use to articulate it. Chinese, for her, became a language of insincerity, a medium through which she could craft beautiful lies but not genuine truths. This emotional dissonance was further heightened by his realization that intelligence and creativity were inextricably linked to this public language—giving rise to doubt whether ever would be herself by thinking and writing in Chinese.

However, the option of writing in English did not eliminate the dissonance; it transformed it into some other shape. It was freeing; it was a way of trying to distance herself from cultural and emotional baggage. English, as an acquired language, remained untainted by her upbringing's ideological constraints, allowing her to construct an approach to language as a neutral space in which she could explore her thoughts and feelings unconcerned by collective history. Yet, this very detachment introduced a new layer of emotional complexity. Writing in English required her to sever ties with the intimacy of her native tongue, creating a sense of estrangement not only from her past but also from certain aspects of her identity.

Li's adoption of English can be conceptualized in the context of Frantz Fanon and his ideas on language, and how that brings about an individual's identity. In his prominent work *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon discusses how language operates not merely as a tool of communication but

as a site of identity construction and resistance; he says, *to speak is to exist absolutely for the other* (Fanon 17), emphasizing how language shapes individual perceptions of and by others.

While Fanon's analysis is rooted in the colonial experience, where the colonized subject grapples with the imposed language of the colonizer, his insights resonate powerfully with Li's linguistic journey. As a diasporic writer, in her rejection of Chinese as her medium of storytelling and adoption of English, Li navigates a similar dynamic of resistance and self-definition, albeit in a different historical and cultural context. For Li, English becomes a means to transcend the ideological confines of her upbringing, allowing her to construct a narrative identity untethered from the collective memory and political history embedded in her native language.

Yiyun Li's linguistic journey brings out this central ambivalence of the adoption of a new tongue, one also often discussed by Fanon. English allows her to reconstruct her identity, but it also comes with its challenges. On one hand, English provides her with the detachment necessary to explore painful or complex themes; on the other hand, it introduces a sense of estrangement, where the emotional resonance of her words is filtered through a linguistic medium that is not intrinsically hers. This duality reflects what Fanon describes as the simultaneous liberation and alienation that comes with adopting a new language, where the individual gains a new voice but loses the immediate intimacy of their native tongue.

### ***Negotiating Belonging – Language, Memory, and Hybrid Identity in Eva Hoffman's Journey***

Eva Hoffman is a prominent writer and scholar whose work has significantly contributed to the understanding of language, migration, and identity. Born in Poland, Hoffman's personal journey from her native country to Canada and eventually the United States serves as the foundation for her explorations into the complex relationship between language and self. Her autobiographical

*Lost in Translation* examines the experience of navigating between languages and cultures, focusing deeply on the emotional and psychological wretchedness that comes with the process of learning a new language. Here, she describes how learning and internalizing English became more than just a means of survival; it became a medium of self-expression weighed down with a sense of loss. Adopting English for Hoffman was both a way to understand the world around her and a means of shutting her out from reconnecting with her Polish roots, memories, and cultural identity.

Hoffman's early life in Poland was deeply entwined with the Polish language, which played a pivotal role in shaping her sense of self and belonging. It was through Polish that she connected to her heritage, the rhythms of her childhood, and the intimate bonds she shared with her parents and the Polish community around her. In this early stage of her life, language provided a sense of rootedness, allowing Hoffman to negotiate her identity within the familiar frameworks of Polish society. The language served as a vessel for expressing her emotions, thoughts, and experiences, helping her understand her place in the world.

When Hoffman moved from Poland to Canada, and later the United States, she was not just relocating physically but undergoing a significant linguistic transformation. The acquisition of English, while necessary for survival and integration into her new environment, came with a deep sense of loss. Leaving behind the language of her childhood, family, and country was a very serious and traumatic disconnect from the roots of her identity. Without the language of her childhood, she felt a profound disconnect from the cultural and emotional grounding that Polish had provided her. However, the transition to English in an unfamiliar, predominantly English-speaking environment marked the beginning of an emotional alienation that would persist throughout her migration journey.

Shifting for Hoffman from Polish to English was not merely a shift in the medium of communication but also a shift in the larger society. It meant new cultural obligations and social structures, which had always placed her as an outsider. Learning English had all this with it: the weight of new and different social worlds that did not fit easily into the particularities of her Polish identity. In many ways, English signified a new societal identity for Hoffman, but it also pointed out the emotional and psychological ripple effects of migrating. Learning English indeed opened doors for her new opportunities and for interacting with larger society, but it also cut her up into two cultures: none of which she was capable of claiming totally as her own. She found herself positioned in a liminal space; caught between her roots in Polish and her surrounding English culture- and in constant change shifting her identity to accommodate both of these. The language that had once comforted and sustained her became, for Hoffman, the string of dislocation, for she strove with the burden of emotion inherent in this identity that was neither really Polish nor really English.

Bhabha's concept of the "third space" becomes particularly relevant to understanding Hoffman's experience. The third space, according to Bhabha, is the site of negotiation, where multiple identities and languages collide, leading to a hybrid form of cultural expression. For Hoffman, English does not merely replace Polish; rather, it interacts with her original language to form a complex, multilayered identity. In this space, Hoffman finds herself constantly reinterpreting both her past and her present, negotiating the meaning of her experiences in a new cultural and linguistic framework. The "in-between" nature of her identity—the space where Polish and English collide—becomes a crucial site for personal and cultural transformation.

In this hybrid space, language became both a bridge and a barrier. While English opened doors to new opportunities and social roles, it also distanced Hoffman from her past, from the language of

her childhood, and from the emotional connections that had once defined her. At the same time, Polish was no longer enough to express her changing identity and complex emotions in the context of her new life in North America. The sense of belonging she had once found in the Polish language was now replaced by a feeling of displacement, as both languages became insufficient in articulating the full spectrum of her identity.

### **Jhumpa Lahiri's Quest for Linguistic Liberation**

Jhumpa Lahiri's literary career is characterized by her focus on identity, migration, and the conflicts between languages and cultures. Lahiri was born in London in 1967 to Bengali parents; she immigrated to the United States with her family when she was an infant. Her first encounter with language was therefore marked by a blending of Bengali, her first language, and English, the language of her more dominant environment. Bengali remained the primary language in her home until English took over as the language of education, friendship, and work. In interviews, Lahiri has often recounted the ambivalence between the two languages she felt growing up, as each language seemed to pull her in different directions. Despite her literary triumphs in English, the language was never completely hers. Quite simply as she put it in a 2021 article for *The Guardian*, Lahiri has always existed in a *kind of linguistic exile*, a state in which her emotional and intellectual relationship with language was fragmented and complicated.

This sense of linguistic exile—of being neither fully at home in Bengali nor English—came to define much of Lahiri's early literary output. Her short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and novel *The Namesake* (2003) both explore the immigrant experience, focusing on characters who, much like Lahiri, are caught between two worlds. For these characters, language acts both as a bridge and a barrier. While the English language allows them access to American

society, it is also what cuts them off from their ancestry and themselves. Although she received her first acclaim for her English writing, it wasn't an easy relationship: it was a language by which she could speak and, at the same time, a language that seemed a bit distant and not so completely part of her inner world.

*"I used to look for an identity that could be sharp, acceptable, mine. But now the idea of a precise identity seems a trap, and I prefer an overabundant one: the Italian piece, the Brooklyn one, the Indian one." (Lahiri, 2017)*

This realization led to Lahiri's dramatic decision: to immerse herself fully in Italian, a language that was not tied to her family, her heritage, or her literary career. By writing in Italian, Lahiri decisively rejected all her given linguistic securities. Italian, a language she approached as an outsider, was thus a blank slate for her, free of baggage that accompanied her literature in English and Bengali.

Lahiri's decision to immerse herself in Italian was not simply a practical one but a deeply emotional and creative response to her struggles with English. For Lahiri, Italian represented an opportunity to reinvent her relationship with language. As she explains in *In Other Words*, she felt a deep desire to "escape" the language she had been writing in for years. In choosing Italian, Lahiri was not just adopting a new language; she was deviating from the linguistic and cultural matrix within which she had lived her life and built up a career. In the process, she began to experience a profound sense of liberation.

This immersion was not a gradual or academic pursuit. For three years, Lahiri decided to write and think solely in Italian. Living in Rome, she moved outside the circle of English. Not speaking, writing, or reading at all in English, she communicated, thought, and created herself solely through

Italian. This decision to sever her ties with her native language marked the beginning of a transformation in Lahiri's understanding of both language and self.

Stuart Hall's theory of the self proposes a strong framework to study Jhumpa Lahiri's language experience and self-expression struggle in *In Other Words*. Hall maintains that identity is never static, on the contrary, it is a fluid, ground-ever-changing entity. It is produced by various competing historical, cultural, and linguistic factors that coexist in interdependent and dynamic ways. In his essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Hall presents, thus, the idea of identity as "always in the process of becoming," a condition arising out of interactions of one's ancestry with the cultural milieu encountered over the course of one's lifetime. His emphasis on identity as a process of continual transformation is particularly relevant in understanding the journey of a diasporic individual like Jhumpa Lahiri, who navigates multiple languages and cultural identities throughout her life.

Hall's cultural hybridity seems particularly relevant to Lahiri's experience. Hybridity, in Hall's framework, denotes the mixing and mingling together of cultures, identities, and linguistic forms that occur especially in the contexts of migration and diasporic life. The hybridization for Lahiri has been exemplified above in her shift from Bengali and English to Italian--the new language containing the blend of cultures she traverses. It is also an inquiry concerning the manner in which identity is formed by mixing languages and culture, a certain merging of her experiences with the present realities. The hybridities that Hall talks about are also pertinent to the tension within Lahiri: the tension of struggling to claim ownership of her voice in English and Bengali, each linked to aspects of her family history and cultural roots. The legacies of immigration, displacement, and expectation are poured into her past languages. The Italian, in particular, opens an entirely new



space for her to play with language while freeing her from her cultural and linguistic burdens from past identities.

## **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that language is not merely a communicative strongly constructed system; rather, it is a dynamic force in the shaping of identity- particularly in a diaspora. It uses both the bridge through which to allege cultural heritage and displace marker loss-renewal. Diasporic people consider changing languages to refer to identity change, not only vocabulary change, as indicated by Stuart Hall's view of identity as fluid and by Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity. This is because language becomes both a site of resistance and reinvention, shaping how individuals navigate the complexities of belonging.

It shows how Jhumpa Lahiri, Yiyun Li, and Eva Hoffman exemplify distinct trajectories of linguistic transformation. Lahiri consciously redefined herself by immersing herself voluntarily in Italian; Li, while using her native tongue, signals a rupture and distancing; and Hoffman's experiences encapsulate nostalgia versus assimilation. These journeys are illustrations of language as having battlegrounds, sites for emotions, and psyches reflecting both individual and collective memory. Ultimately, this paper underscores the transformative power of language in shaping diasporic identity, emphasizing that every linguistic choice carries the weight of past and future selves.

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